



Easy to Love by TheRealSokka

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Summary: The party is in their final high school year, and everyone is about to go their separate ways. In the emotional chaos that that entails, Mike Wheeler comes to a strange realization and Will Byers is a little too good at babysitting. /Same continuity as "Together" and "The Light in Our Eyes".

1. Easy to Love

Wednesdays really should be outlawed, Mike Wheeler thought miserably.

Nobody liked them. Really; nobody. It was the time when the last energy reserves from the weekend had just been completely depleted, the next weekend was still nowhere in sight, and one was in general just tempted to lie down and die. Mike was no stranger to that temptation. He had started downright hating this particular day of the week back in middle school, and it had only gotten worse from there.

He dragged himself up the front porch, unable to suppress a huge yawn. The reasonable part of him knew that his extreme tiredness at the moment was largely his own fault, but in his defence, he hadn't had much choice in the matter: combine the latest issues of the *X-Men* that just came out with an excited Will Byers, an even more excited Dustin Henderson, plus lots of coke, and you had a recipe for disaster that guaranteed you would not get much sleep that night. At the time, school had seemed like a secondary concern to Mike. Of course, the next morning school begged to differ and proceeded to kick his tired ass even more than usual. Add to that his day job at the Hawk (which he normally liked), and you had one hell of a day that Mike really could have done without. Right now, as he pushed open the front door of their home, he just wanted some peace and quiet.

"Miiiike!"

"What the...*huff!* Ow! Get off, Holly!"

Or his little sister steam railing out of the kitchen and into his arms, properly knocking him over in the process. That worked, too.

Holly disentangled herself from him and proceeded to tap insistently on her new 'Dora-the-Explorer' watch. "You're late again!" she complained, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet restlessly. For some reason, and completely incomprehensible to Mike, in the last few months his seven year old sister had developed an aversion to staying still for more than two seconds at any point ever.

Where does she take all this energy from? Mike wondered, not for the first time. Aloud he said: "Holly, calm down. It's barely five minutes past six."

"That's almost...20 minutes late!" Holly stated mercilessly. Then she crossed her arms, obviously satisfied that she'd gotten the equation right.

Mike took this moment to reflect that he'd really drawn the shortest straw in this family: no sooner was the bossy older sister out of the house than the formerly cute younger sister realized that someone else had to be the bossy one now. And it was decidedly not going to be her brother; that was for sure.

"Come on! Have to show you something!"

As Mike was being dragged into the kitchen, Holly's designated babysitter for the evening looked up from his artwork. And smiled. That smile was still the exact same Will Byers smile as years ago when Mike had first met him, and just like then, he returned it practically on instinct. But as for the rest of his childhood friend, Mike still had to resist the urge to blink and rub his eyes. His mind still couldn't quite keep track of the transformation his friend had gone through.

Will really looked the part of high schooler now, having gotten taller over the years, until he almost matched Mike (though not quite, as Mike was fond to remind him). He'd stopped wearing his hair in a bowl cut years ago and opted for a looser, longer style quite similar to his brother's, which somehow worked wonders to make him look older. His new glasses didn't hurt, either. On the occasions when there were still shadows under his eyes, they concealed them pretty well. All in all, Will was hardly recognizable as the scrawny, tense kid Mike Wheeler had met on the swings, and Mike sometimes wondered if he himself looked so wildly different now, too.

But when Will smiled his (unchanged) open smile – like now – he was pretty much the definition of 'trustworthy babysitter'. Or at least Mike's parents seemed to think so, hence why he had gotten this job.

"Hey, Mike. We're just finishing up homework here." he said by way

of greeting. He gestured at the table in front of him. Indeed, there were piles of what looked like Holly's math books scattered everywhere. The sight made Mike involuntarily think of his own pile of homework weighing down his backpack, and he let out a resigned sigh.

Will looked his friend up and down and raised an eyebrow. There was a little playful undertone to his voice: "How was *your* day?"

"Don't even ask." Mike collapsed into the nearest chair. He stared at Will accusingly: "I don't get it: your eyes were clearly open when we reached the last page; I saw it. You can't have gotten more sleep than me. How you can be so chipper after such a long night is beyond me."

Will shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal: "I don't need a lot of sleep."

"Sure; okay. Whatever it is your taking; I want some!"

"It's the Byers-efficiency gene. It's not for sale."

"I hate you right now."

"No you don't."

"Look what I made!" Holly interrupted their nonsense-conversation, thrusting a piece of paper into Mike's hands. His eyes had to take a moment to adjust. The thing was filled with lines and squiggles, some of which almost, with some imagination, maybe resembled stick figures. The rest just looked like colours thrown onto the page in random order, with no regard for symmetry or logic – except maybe in his sister's eyes. Holly was beaming proudly. For her sake, Mike's tired mind tried its best to find some coherent picture in all the chaos. "It's – ahm – quite something."

His little sister nodded eagerly: "Will likes it, too. He says I draw really good." She threw a quick glance at Will and blushed up to her hair roots.

Mike couldn't help grinning: "Is that so? Well; in that case you can be proud of it; there's no higher praise."

Now they were both blushing.

"Mike!" Will muttered in embarrassed protest.

It was little things like these that always cheered Mike up and made him forgive the world for things like Wednesdays. Because Will still had that little adorable blush when someone praised his artwork – as if anyone couldn't. What he produced in their Art classes frequently drew the envy of pretty much all the other participants. It was a mystery to Mike how Will himself apparently refused to see it like that.

"I'm just saying. Just making sure she appreciates the praise enough." he clarified.

"I do!" Holly protested vehemently. So vehemently that Mike was actually a little taken aback. He wondered whether his sister's vocabulary had even extended to 'appreciate' yet or if she just liked talking back to him.

He turned to her. "Anyway, young lady: Weren't you supposed to do homework?"

Holly puffed herself up to her full height – meaning she just about came up to his chest. "Did it all. It wasn't even hard. And I'm not a lady." As if to underline the point, she stuck her tongue out at him.

Bossy little sisters are next on the to-be-outlawed list, Mike pondered.

There was a little chuckle. Mike threw a glare in Will's direction, who could barely suppress his grin.

His friend cleared his throat: "Ahem. She's right, though: I think we're all done here. That next Math test can come." The grin dimmed and he gave Mike a questioning look: "Are you ready for ours yet? I still don't get what exactly Mr Hanson wants from us."

"And you think I do?! That man is a fucking mystery box; who's to know?" Mike quickly glanced at Holly. "You didn't hear that!"

"Did!"

"Holly..."

"Fuckin misery box!"

Mike groaned: "Dammit."

Will's expression was insufferably smug. "And that's why they don't leave you in charge here, Mike." he stated dryly. "You're a bad influence."

"You seem to have done alright with me all these years."

"Nah; that's all a front. You just don't see how damaged you've left me on the inside."

"Oh, I'm so sorry about that. Do you want me to start a repair mission?"

"No thanks. I think I like the damage, all in all."

Mike nudged him: "That was the right answer. Positively crazy; that's us."

Will laughed out loud. Then he glanced at the kitchen clock. "I should get going. Still got stuff to do."

Mike didn't want him to leave quite yet. They'd barely even seen each other over this stressful week. "You sure we can't slot in a little Star wars movie? Or two?" He made his best pleading eyes at his friend.

"Mike, we have a test tomorrow!"

"Problem?"

"Oh my God, Mike..." Will broke off, shaking his head. "I'm not even going there. Holly, let's clean up this mess and then I'm off, okay?"

"Okay!" Holly jumped to her feet and promptly collected all her books, pencils and anything else that was lying around. Staggering only slightly under the pile, she ran up the stairs to her room.

Mike stared at the spot where she had vanished, uncomprehending. "Why does she listen to you? She barely even listens to mom now, let alone me."

Will shrugged: "I don't know. Maybe I'm actually good at this." He absentmindedly went through the stack of loose paper that Holly hadn't managed yet. Mike saw that most of them were filled with drawings and doodles, and he briefly wondered how they had even gotten any Math done in between all that.

A few moments passed in tired silence.

"She's really good at drawing, you know. I'm not just saying that."

Mike, busy opening a coke from the fridge, raised an eyebrow at his friend: "Don't tell me you could actually see something in – whatever she made there?"

Will shook his head in mock disappointment: "You lack the artistic eye, Mike. I think it's beautiful."

Before Mike had a chance to reply, or hit Will for his insolence, Holly sprinted back into the room, somehow having gotten her hands on that big cookie jar that their mother always kept out of sight on the fridge. Apparently, that spot wasn't as safe as she thought.

Holly beamed and held up the jar. "One for the road?" she asked.

Mike snorted. He could only guess she had gotten that phrase from one of dad's movies or other.

Will looked down to the proud cookie thief questioningly. "Thank you. And what's the price for this?"

Mike's little sister looked up at him hopefully: "Taxi?!"

Will gave a sigh. Then he took a cookie and leaned down. "But only to the front door!" he consented.

"Wohoo!" With a giggle, Holly jumped onto his back and let herself be carried through the hall, something she apparently never got tired of. There was a short struggle where Will tried to pack all his things into his backpack without losing his balance, which looked rather more difficult than usual, with Mike's little sister shifting around on his shoulders. With her wide smile, she looked like she was in heaven.

Once he was finally done, Will threw a warning glare at Mike. "Don't say anything." he advised.

Mike laughed quietly: "I wouldn't dare." Nor did he. He opted to follow the odd pair in amused silence, instead.

To his credit, Will managed to get both of them to the front door in one piece and without smashing anything else in the hallway into a million. Mike took pity on his friend's situation and opened the front door for him, which earned him another Byers smile. His stomach did a little flip. He would really miss those, he couldn't help but think.

Will gently lowered his passenger to the ground and replaced her with his backpack. Then he turned to Mike, completely missing the adoring look Holly gave him. "So; I guess I'll see you tomorrow in Ms Smith's, then?"

Mike groaned: "Don't remind me."

Will chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. "Hey; Mike? Can we have a sleepover again sometime, maybe? If- if that's not too childish now."

"Never too childish, Will." Mike assured him. "Whenever you like; I don't have the energy to study at night, anyway."

"Got it." Will jumped on his bike. "I'll call you. Bye, Mike. Bye, Holly." With one last wave, he turned around and pedalled off the Wheeler's yard.

Holly stayed where she stood, looking after Will with a look in her eyes that Mike could only describe as star-struck.

Well, well, how about that...

He cleared his throat loudly. "I'm closing the door now..."

"Noo!" She quickly jumped over the threshold before Mike could deliver on his threat. She hit him on the arm and stared at him accusingly. "You're mean, Mike! Why can't you be as nice as Will?"

"I won't answer that. Hey; 'as nice as Will'? I see. You two seem to be

getting along alright, after all. Whatever happened to you never wanting a babysitter? *Ever?*"

His sister pouted: "He's not my sitter! I'm not a baby anymore!"

"Well, he's certainly nice for a sitter; I'll admit that."

It took less than a second for the pout to disappear and for Holly's eyes to resume their dreamy look. It was rather cute, actually. She looked at her picture that Will had called 'beautiful', and smiled: "He's nice, and he's pretty, and he likes me! I'm going to marry him!"

Mike nearly spilled his coke. An uncomfortable amount of it went up his nose and prevented him from commenting for a while. "Okay; that escalated fast!" he finally croaked in a hoarse voice. "Didn't see that coming. Someone is smitten!"

"I'm not!" Holly protested vehemently.

Then: "What is 'smitten'?"

"It's what you are lil' sis. You're head over heels!"

"That doesn't even make sense! You're stupid!" Holly gave him the outstretched tongue once again and ran off, back upstairs.

Mike chuckled to himself. He already knew he was going to tease her over this forever. He briefly considered grabbing the walkie and telling Will about his little admirer. Then he decided he wasn't actually that mean a brother. And too tired, besides that.

What a day. That summed it up pretty well.

Mike stared up at the ceiling of his room, his thoughts wandering, not thinking about anything in particular. Life really was strange enough already without his little sister falling in love with his best friend.

He doubted it was anything serious – she was seven, for crying out loud; everyone had crushed at that age – but it still felt a little strange that she would go for Will over one of her classmates. Not that it didn't make sense, Mike reflected. Will had something about

him that made people like him. Apparently even his little sister wasn't immune to that.

"Nice and pretty." Mike repeated absentmindedly. Sometimes he envied his little sister. For Holly, being a child, that was reason enough to marry him, and never mind the age difference or that Will had never shown interest in any girl as far as Mike was aware.

He sighed. Somebody would have to let her down gently, and Mike had the uncomfortable feeling that, with Nancy out of town, that was going to be him. He wasn't looking forward to that conversation.

Perhaps it was the exhaustion, but as he lay there, Mike's thoughts kept coming back to Will. Maybe it was nostalgia, too. The way he grinned. His sense of quiet calm that he had adopted after the entire Upside Down incident. The calm that didn't mean Will couldn't shout when they won a campaign or a new year needed counting down.

That was perhaps what Mike treasured most; this side of Will Byers that most people didn't get to see; the Will who was upbeat and funny and had a twinkle in his eye and a spring in his step when the right music was playing. And, Mike now added to the list, the Will who seemed to be utterly incapable of getting mad at Holly – and the other way around –, a feat that no other member of the Wheeler family had managed to date.

"Dammit." Mike sighed in the darkness of his bedroom.

Usually, those thoughts would have brought a smile to his face, but lately they were always accompanied by a certain sadness.

It was the sense of something ending: Will had been his friend for pretty much as long as he could remember. But now their time in high school was nearing its end and it looked like after that the party would all go their separate ways: Dustin was headed for Indiana State University; Lucas and Max were planning their work-and-travel tour through the country; El had been accepted to Indianapolis, provided she passed her exams this year – which looked likely – and Will would be moving in with his brother in New York to study at the Academy of Art.

As for Mike, he had postponed the decision for the longest time, since he was still completely unsure what he wanted to do, or where to do it. He only knew who he wanted to do it with, but in that respect it didn't even matter where he went; he would always be leaving someone behind. It sucked.

They of course hadn't planned to split up like this. In fact, at the beginning the idea had floated around that they should all apply to the same colleges to keep in contact. Sadly, those plans rather quickly dissolved into getting accepted anywhere at all, what with their distinctly different course objectives and not always perfect grades.

As a result, the atmosphere at their last D&D session had been a lot more nostalgic than usual. Dustin had barely even been playing, too busy with making plans for 'one last hurrah' as he called it. Lucas (nostalgically) had called him an idiot. Dustin called Lucas a numpty. El asked what Dustin meant with 'hurrah'. Max explained to her that she shouldn't even mind; the boys were all idiots. El nodded gravely, agreeing with her point. Two of those boys then proceeded to get into an 'offended' argument with them, while the other two just rolled their eyes at each other about it all.

Mike could still see Will's fond grin as he'd watched the others bicker back and forth. There had been sadness, too, but his friend had refused to let it shine through. Like he was resolved to enjoy what time they had left, and for them to enjoy it, too. Probably more the latter. Will was like that.

Now the smile did steal onto Mike's face. He replayed the memory in his mind. He couldn't really fault his sister, if he was being honest. Will Byers was everything anyone could ever want, in his opinion. It was easy to fall in love with him. *Easy to love...*

It took a couple of seconds before Mike fully registered what he had just thought.

Wait...

Oh.

Oh.

Wait; what?!

1) Literally, this was written in less than two hours. And not beta'd.

2) First time writing this relationship.

Don't judge, please.

2. Strange Little Feeling

Here comes Part 2 of whatever I'm calling this. Again; I usually don't write romance, so be patient with me if this sounds a little stilted (and point out the problems if you see them, please).

Strange Little Feeling

The situation was, to put it mildly; problematic.

The morning after that very strange Wednesday, Mike suddenly couldn't look his best friend straight in the eye – at least not without blushing. Which was kind of a problem, since they had practically every class together.

It was such a strange feeling that it took Mike a while to identify it: he was nervous. Nervous about being around Will. He had never felt nervous around Will. Why should he? It was *Will*; the friend he'd been growing up with all his life. The first person he always came to when he felt down. And vice versa.

But now, whenever their eyes chanced to meet in class, at lunch or in the hallways, Mike always quickly looked away. He couldn't help it. The mere sight of Will made his stomach all fluttery. Also; Mike staring at Will like he'd just fallen from the sky would probably be slightly weird, even by their standards. Which was how Mike ended up trying to avoid his best friend for the majority of the morning, even turning around to walk a long detour to their classroom at one point. It was ridiculous. He *knew* it was ridiculous.

The worst thing? Mike wasn't even sure *why* exactly he was doing this whole avoiding-his-best-friend thing.

It wasn't like anything had happened. They hadn't quarrelled or anything; Will hadn't done anything spectacular and neither had he. It was just that Mike for some reason now had to fight this constant urge to *stare* at his best friend as if Will had transformed into some strange alien overnight. Which he hadn't; he was still same old

awesome Will Byers. And Mike couldn't wrap his head around why Will's shy smile and laugh and concentratedly furrowed brow were suddenly so fascinating to him when he had seen them pretty much every day for the majority of his life.

Well, he did have a notion. But he had pushed that one *far* to the back of his mind, too scared to even consider it. That couldn't be what this was. He was being ridiculous.

Thankfully, it being Thursday and exam day, his friends weren't much better.

"Is anyone else feeling like getting out of bed this morning was a bad idea? Or is it just me?" Lucas asked around.

If that doesn't sum it up, Mike thought, but didn't say it out loud.

"Welcome to the club, stalker. I think El said word for word the same earlier." Max chewed contemplatively on her salad. "Thursdays suck."

"Where even is El?" Lucas asked, glancing around for the mop of curly hair.

"Library. Said she had to study again." Will replied, his voice hitching a little with barely suppressed amusement. "I never knew her to be so industrious."

"Must be her three exams coming up next week."

Mike stared down at his plate, pretending that his mashed potatoes and the gooey grey mass that might have been a fish at some point were more fascinating than Will's laughter on the other side of the table. Lunch for him had turned into an exercise in silent food contemplation. Had he not been so confused, he'd have been tempted to laugh out loud at his own behaviour.

"You don't look too alive either, Mike." Lucas commented.

Luckily, Dustin arrived before Mike had to reply, not even waiting to sit down before he launched into a nervous raving about the test they had just written, so Mike's silence wasn't too conspicuous. Apparently, his friend was dead certain he'd completely flunked

every question (everybody at the table knew he hadn't), and frantically tried to come up with contingency plans, until Max handed him her apple, telling him to eat and shut up.

Mike thought he himself hadn't fucked up too badly, but then again his brain was such a jumble of weird feelings and math equations that he already couldn't remember most of the questions anymore. He might have written a paragraph about Darth Vader's cooking skills for all he knew.

At some point, Will crossed the table and sat down next to him, Dustin's panic apparently having partially rubbed off on him, and wanted to compare notes; just to make *absolutely sure* that that one answer hadn't been $(f) = 17$, after all. Mike thought he managed an alright conversation. Perhaps he was a bit more abrupt than usual, and perhaps his fingers were fumbling a little too much with the note cards, and *maybe* he got the equation backwards twice in a row, but otherwise: alright.

Considering that one longer look at his best friend suddenly had the effect of erasing every conscious thought from Mike's head, and considering that that friend was currently sitting right next to him, those little shortcomings could probably be forgiven in the grand scheme of things.

Will definitely knew something was up; he wasn't blind. He left Mike alone after a while when he noticed how tight-lipped he was answering his questions. Mike felt a pang of guilt at the confused look that passed across his best friend's face. He must wonder what had happened. Mike wished he could explain it, most of all to himself. He knew full well that he'd never acted like this before.

But Will didn't bring it up. After all, if anything was bugging Mike, Mike would tell him once and if he wanted to. That had always been how they worked, ever since back when they were little six year old midgets in elementary school. Both of them had hated the constant "Are you sure you're alright?"-s they tended to get at home, so they'd made an unspoken agreement early on: Questioning the other wasn't necessary; if it was about anything important, they would talk about it sooner or later.

This was a little bit different, though. Mike didn't want to tell Will that it was *him* who was bugging him – and yes; 'bugging' was actually the most harmless expression for what he made Mike feel. And even that could only come out wrong.

"What the hell is wrong with me?!" Mike exasperatedly questioned his locker when they went to retrieve the books for next period. Of course, the thing refused an answer.

He spied Lucas and Will ahead, just entering their next classroom. He took a deep breath and followed them. *You're overthinking again. Just do what you normally do.* Perhaps all this strangeness would pass if he gave it a little time to cool down. If he just ignored it until then, maybe he could avoid doing something stupid.

The problem was that he didn't have Will's 'talk when you feel like it' agreement with all the others, who naturally also noticed his weird behaviour after a while. Not that it was that hard, with how he kept looking literally anywhere but at Will. Lucas and Dustin took turns shooting him curious glances all throughout Art, but knew better than to bring it up right there. So, as was to be expected, Max was the first to call Mike out on it.

She cornered him back by the lockers at the end of fifth period. When he turned around, she was standing there, with both hands on her hips and a glare on her face. Her being a head shorter than him didn't make that pose any less intimidating, and Mike immediately knew he was in big trouble.

"What happened?" she demanded simply.

"What do you mean?" Mike replied, trying to look like he was searching for something in his bag.

If at all possible, Max' frown only deepened. She had a zero tolerance limit for bullshit. "Don't give me that, Wheeler. You're acting really weird around Will; as in, you're acting like a douche. He's confused, and, frankly, so am I. What. Happened?!"

Mike winced. She made it sound like he was physically hurting Will. Was he? From looking at him, Mike hadn't thought that Will was

upset about his behaviour, but he also knew that Will would be good at not letting it show if he was. He had a bad tendency to never want to be a bother to anyone. Max on the other hand was a lot more straightforward, and by the glare he was currently under, she was entirely holding him responsible.

Her and Will had a really strange friendship, one that by all rules of logic really shouldn't have worked. They were basically polar opposites: he was quiet, she was loud; he was the local bullying target, she was the cool girl from California; he was Star Wars, she was Star Trek. And yet they talked and laughed and rode together as if they had never done anything else.

Plus, for reasons Mike had never quite understood, they were almost frighteningly protective of each other. If anyone tried to bully Will anymore, that guy had better pray that Max wasn't anywhere in a five mile radius, or else he was going to need a lot of friends to back him up once she found out. Mike had seen that process in action once, and that had been a scary enough experience for him to act a lot more polite around the redhead for the rest of that week.

Still, until now, Mike had never been on the receiving end of that fury. He must have really fucked up.

"It's nothing." he mumbled. "Sorry; I didn't mean..."

"It's obviously not nothing. Did you two have a fight, or what is it?"

"No! No; I'm just being stupid, that's all."

Max' glare softened ever so slightly. She uncrossed her arms. "Well, go and tell *him* that, then." She reached for his arm – not to rip it off and beat him up with it (as part of him expected) but tug at him insistently. "You know he's going to be blaming himself."

Dammit. Why is she always right?

Mike found Will in front of the AV room, chatting with Mr Clarke.

Clarke was still pretty much the only adult at school that Mike was glad to see. Their former Science teacher had sort of semi-migrated

from Hawkins Middle, teaching a few classes here and a few there. Naturally, AV was one of them, so their established group had found themselves continuing their technological exploits pretty much unchanged. The teacher didn't seem to mind the extra work.

Mike cleared his throat: "Hey, Will."

"Hey." the other said cheerfully, turning around. He didn't *look* upset. His posture was relaxed; he was smiling brightly, probably from a joke they had just shared; a random stray hair was falling into his face and *stop staring you're doing it again, Mike!*

"Oh, hello Mike." Mr Clarke greeted him. If he noticed how hastily Mike looked away from them, he didn't comment on it. "Will was just telling me about your radio project. A two-mile radius increase? That's not bad; not bad at all!"

At the moment, Mike had all but forgotten about that. "Oh, uhm, yeah. That is going great. Mr Clarke, could I borrow Will for a second?"

Will looked at him questioningly.

The teacher nodded: "Sure. Just go on in; I'll be a bit later today. Exam period, you know."

"Oh, believe me; we know." Will replied sarcastically.

Mike snickered, probably a bit too loudly. Mr Clarke joined in good-naturedly. His friend shot Mike a grin, and suddenly Mike couldn't for the life of him remember why he had been so tense. This was *Will*, for crying out loud. What was wrong with him?

"Let's go in." he said.

The AV room was hopelessly cluttered; a picture of what Mr Clarke liked to call 'organized chaos'. There was just enough space to move around and pull out two of the revolving chairs. Will closed the door behind them, rightly judging that Mike wanted some privacy. "What's up, Mike?"

Mike cleared his throat. He leaned forward, with Will looking at him

expectantly. He didn't know what had shifted, but their eye contact now was easy – as it should have been. This was good; this was familiar. Like late night conversations in the basement, when everyone else was already gone to bed. Just the two of them.

"I wanted to talk to you."

Will nodded. "I figured. Did something happen since yesterday?"

Not exactly. I'm just having a bunch of strange thoughts all of a sudden that I don't know what to do with. Most of them revolving around you.

"No. I'm acting a little weird, I know – I just wanted to say, it's nothing you did, okay? Just me being stupid, that's all."

"Oh. Okay." Will's tone was even, but his shoulder's relaxed visibly. A bottled up tension seemed to leave his body. The small smile returned to his lips. "Do you want to tell me?"

"Uh, no; it's - I think I've got it under control."

HAH!

Will nodded again. He didn't seem to notice how Mike's look lingered on him for a bit too long. "Okay. I was wondering; cause that equation you did there was a bit..."

Suddenly, the lights went out. For a few seconds, the AV room was steeped in darkness. Probably a surge in the grid, Mike thought. Thankfully, nothing around them short-circuited. Then the overhead light came back to life – but kept flickering sporadically.

Mike noticed Will flinch. For a heartbeat there was fear in his expression, before it turned into a flustered look of embarrassment.

"I hate that." Will muttered. His hand brushed against Mike's and intertwined their fingers. Again, something he had done countless times before, so it really had no right to cause that electrical jolt to run up Mike's arms as it did.

He had to clear his throat again. "Yeah. I know."

Will had gotten over the Upside Down surprisingly well, in Mike's opinion. He hadn't turned insane, for a start. But there were still these little moments every now and then where it showed, and then Mike just wanted to hold his friend and promise him it was going to be alright. But he knew Will hated being treated that way. So he opted instead for "Hey; we've still got time before the others'll be here. Wanna plan that sleepover?"

Will nodded gratefully. He deliberately ignored the flickering lights. "Yeah. I think we'll all need it after this week."

"Friday; my place; popcorn?"

"Sounds perfect." Will replied. "Didn't Lucas want to watch that weird slasher movie again?"

"Me too, actually." Mike admitted. "We haven't had a scary movie in a while."

Will's eyebrows rose all the way up to his hairline: "'A Nightmare on Elm Street' is a scary movie?!"

"Hey; it's trying, dammit!"

"If you say so...What about 'The Godfather'; do you have that at hand? Hopper is loving that one, from what I hear."

"My dad might have bought it. Haven't seen it yet either. But are you even old enough for that one yet?" Mike teased.

"Shut up!" Will hit him on the arm. "Just because you're 18 now doesn't mean you're allowed to act all high and mighty."

"What was that? Did the minor just say something to me?"

This time he managed to dodge the incoming hit. Will glared at him. "You're an idiot, Mike Wheeler." he stated. But the little twitch of his mouth belied the grim expression.

Mike laughed. *See? All good.* Perhaps he'd just imagined all the weirdness earlier, because this – *Will* – felt like he always did. No need to break eye contact – and as such, Mike noticed something:

In the flickering light, Will's hazel eyes were changing colours; once green, once brown, as if they couldn't quite make up their mind. It wasn't a drastic shift, not like that scary possession episode; just a shift in the light and the colours playing into each other; something that was so characteristically *Will* that it was almost unnoticeable. Mike had always kind of seen it, but he felt like he was just now really noticing it for the first time.

And there was that strange feeling again, tugging at his chest like it wanted to burst out of there and fly away. And it was still just as frightening. Why was his childhood friend causing this reaction all of a sudden?

Mike had felt like this once before. But back then it had been entirely different circumstances, and directed at an entirely different person.

"Will? You- you know I like you, right?" he blurted out.

His friend blinked at him once, twice; clearly caught off guard by the sudden shift in topic. Then: "Uh. Yeah. I mean, thanks, but- why do you say that?"

"Like, we've been friends for so long, and I think we're pretty good together..."

Will was biting his lip nervously. "This feels like there's a big *but* coming up."

"What? No, no; that's not what I mean!" Mike retracted hastily. What *did* he mean, exactly? "I just – uh, wanted to tell you that, you know? Like, while I still can. You are all going to leave, so I just don't want to waste any more time. What if we grow apart?"

"Mike..."

"I'm- I'm afraid, Will. I don't want this – *us* – to change. Why can't everything stay as it is?!"

Mike hadn't realized how much all this frightened him; how much he had needed to get that out, until he said it. Nor had he realized how much he needed the Byers hug that was suddenly smothering him.

"We're not growing apart, Mike!" Will said that almost like an order. Mike felt him trembling a little (maybe he'd had the same fear?), but the conviction in his voice was undeniable.

"How can you know that?"

"Because I do. College is not going to be the end of the world." His friend pulled away to look at him. Right now, his eyes were a dark brown. "I think things like separating just- happen. Maybe it will actually be good to start somewhere new. But I'm never going to stop being your friend, so don't think that even for a *second*, okay?!"

"Got it, boss!" Mike replied, and meant it. Will's confidence was contagious.

A companionable silence settled over the AV room as each boy pursued his own thoughts. Mike like felt a big knot in his chest had come undone. His confusion about their entire situation was still there, but he waved it away for the time being. He and Will would still be friends with each other, and that should have been all he needed. But they had only five months of *this* left. Five months of tiring schoolwork, movies, babysitting, sleepovers and Will. And Mike wanted more.

"Maybe we should go on a road trip!" he suggested suddenly. The idea had just popped into his head, but was already taking on concrete features. "You know; just the six of us. No school talk; no parents; no Hawkins. What do you think? I think we've earned a celebration after all this."

This meaning mainly school, but also a lot more: his personal roller-coaster of emotions, the smothering stiffness of this town, the entire Upside Down nightmare, and life in general always having it out for them. They *definitely* had deserved some comeuppance, Mike decided.

To his delight, Will perked up instantly. He was so visibly intrigued by the idea, it was almost cute. Though, he schooled his face back into one of polite interest when he noticed Mike's grin. "Like a, ahem, '*last hurrah*', you mean?" he asked innocently.

Mike rolled his eyes. "A little less melodramatic, but yes. What do

you say?"

Will's eyes sparkled. "I'd love to, and you know that. I'll just have to find a way to separate El from her course books for long enough to bring it up. Do you have a plan already, dungeon master?"

He said that with a mischievous little smile, his lips curved upwards ever so slightly; and right then Mike just wanted to lean down and kiss him.

He was so fucked.

.....

3. Just One of Those Byers Arguments

Warning: Aggressive use of good songs ahead.

Also: Hey; a Will POV! I'll probably jump back to Mike for the next one, though.

Just One of Those Byers Arguments

It had started to snow later in the afternoon, and the driveway to the Byers' house was slowly turning into a sledding range. Will, realizing he wasn't likely to make any more progress on wheels, jumped off his bike and pushed it the rest of the way. The sun was already going down.

They were going to have to dig their way out tomorrow, he thought as he watched the snow pile up.

Where other teenagers would have probably been annoyed about that fact, Will took it calmly. He had always liked the snow. And he didn't particularly mind getting up early to shovel it away, since getting up early was his normal routine, anyway. By the time his mother would rush to her car – late for work, most likely – the snowdrifts would lie neatly piled up to the sides of the road, with the shoveler already back inside and sipping some hot chocolate. Winter in Hawkins wasn't so frightening once you'd spent a few years here, and this was only the last, small cold front before the spring.

Besides, Will thought with a grin; they had a telepath in the house. Those snowdrifts had no idea what was coming to them.

A wave of warm air and rock music hit him as he stepped into the house. After a couple of seconds' listening, he recognized the chords of '*I don't believe you*'. A smile stealing onto his face, he kicked off his shoes and walked towards the source of the music, that being his sister's room.

El had inherited Jonathan's old room after he'd moved out, and Will,

for his part, was very glad about it. It meant that they were just across the hall from each other, which came in handy on multiple occasions.

The door to her room was slightly ajar; meaning the loud music coming from within was able to fill the entire house, easily. A sign at eye-level said "*Don't enter; busy stu-dying.*" Will snorted, ignored it and slipped inside. *Studying. Sure.*

El was sitting at her desk, and there was a science book in front of her, alright, but Will somehow doubted she was able to read it while her head was bobbing up and down to the music like that. The speakers of Jonathan's boom box were turned to full power, blasting Mark Hallis' "*Any way you sing it/ It's the same old song.*" through the room. It was physically impossible for El to have heard him come in. Will cleared his throat loudly.

His sister whirled around – accidentally causing the science book to launch itself at the intruder. Will just had time to raise his arms before it hit him, bouncing off his thankfully thick hoodie. Peeking out for more missiles, he threw El an indignant look. She stared back and said something that looked like "Oh, it's just you." judging by the way her mouth moved. The music was lowered down a couple of volumes, and Will was able to actually hear her next sentence: "I thought you were a burglar. You could have knocked."

"A burglar could have plundered the house right now, and you wouldn't have heard a thing." Will stated, nodding at the boom box. "What good was knocking going to do?"

El frowned. Her brows drew together and her nose scrunched up, but it wasn't quite her patented death-glare yet. "I was studying for the exam next week." she said defensively.

Will crossed his arms with a teasing smile. "Really."

"*I don't believe you!*" Hollis sang (appropriately) in the background.

El flushed crimson and turned him off abruptly with a flick of her head.

"What's the subject? 90s alternative classics?" Will asked.

She groaned. "Okay, okay. It was boring and I needed a break, smartass." She reached out and the science book flew back onto the table. Her shoulders slumped as she looked at the heavy thing, the frown vanishing. "I need to work through that by Monday. And there's still two more tests after that." she stated in a defeated voice.

Feeling a rush of sympathy, Will stepped next to her. He looked over her note cards scattered across the table. 'Bipolar currents' he read on one; and 'Muscle Cell Structure' on another; right next to 'What the f*** is glucose 6-phosphate?' on a third.

He caught his sister's eyes. "Going good so far?"

"Peachy."

"Wanna go through it together?"

"Oh thank God; yes!"

El was never quite as devout as during the time the exams came around.

And even though Will wasn't exactly an expert in biology – that was Dustin's job – together they managed to work out the basics at a respectable pace.

And humming *The Clash* together. That was how that kind of activity always ended, for some reason. Today was no exception.

"*The ice age is coming; the sun's zooming in*" Will hummed while crossing out a wrong equation.

"*Meltdown expected, the wheat's growing thin*" his sister added, frowning at his action and inspecting the improved note card critically.

"*London calling!*" they both went, together. Will was a heartbeat out of sync. El looked at him questioningly.

When the song rolled out, she asked "What's up? Did anything happen?"

Will shook his head. His thoughts just kept drifting off today. "There was a power outage during AV. I still get so stupidly anxious whenever that happens. But Mike was there with me. No panic attack."

El blushed strangely. "Yeah. He's good at that."

Will raised an eyebrow. "What's up with *you*?"

"Uhm. That outage might have been me..."

"Scuse me?"

Her ears were beet red. "Not on purpose! I just didn't get that translation, and I was getting frustrated, and... *gah!*" El exclaimed, waving her hand and causing the headlight to flicker in response. She pointed at it indignantly: "See? That's what happens. I hate exams!"

"You, me, the entirety of Hawkins High, I think. We're just lucky the others don't have the power to explode the school every time they come around."

"Sorry."

"No problem. It happens."

Will blinked. Yep, he'd just said that. Telepathic power surges totally happened on a daily basis; nothing remarkable. Not for the two of them, anyway.

Their life really was strange, wasn't it?

"Any other exciting things I caused or missed?" El asked, snapping him out of it.

Will thought for a moment. "Not really. Dustin was hyper-nervous, but, you know; he's Dustin." He cocked his head. "And Mike was acting really weird for a while."

"Weirder than usual?"

"El!" Will chided.

"What? I love him, but he's got his head in the clouds sometimes. Acting weird how?"

"Well; he like kept avoiding me for the first few periods. And then he was really quiet at lunch. But then he came to me before AV and didn't leave for the rest of the day. As in; it was like he wouldn't let me out of his sight for a second. That was a really strange shift." Will shrugged. "Or maybe I'm imagining things. I don't know."

El frowned. "I don't think you're imagining. He did that with me for a while, too. It was really weird; like, one second he was avoiding me and the next he wanted to kiss me." She shrugged: "Maybe it's a Mike-thing. I wasn't complaining."

Will had to fight down a blush. "I doubt it's the exact same thing, El."

"Why? It's about time someone wants to kiss you."

"El!"

"What?! If anyone deserves a date..."

This was starting to hit dangerously close to home, so Will went for a change of subject. "I thought you didn't care about dates. Have you been talking with Max again?"

El gave a shrug. "Might have. You would go well together, though."

"Jesus Christ...! You've been staring at your book for too long. This is Mike we're talking about."

"Exactly. He's not that bad at dating. Or kissing." She glanced at him, in that telepathic-sibling way she had that usually told her exactly what Will was thinking. A look of surprise flickered briefly across her face and she turned to him fully. "So if he wants to kiss you, you should go for it."

"Mike. Does not. Want to kiss me!" Will replied, accentuating every syllable. Where did she always get these impossible ideas from?

El blinked at him innocently. "Whatever you say." she said, and turned back to her note cards.

His sister really could be obnoxiously infuriating when she chose to. Not that Will wasn't prepared for it. Living with a strong-willed, telepathic sister had the benefit that one inevitably got really good at arguing. Him and El had developed their own routine of word-sparring – sometimes wordlessly; seeing how well they could read the other. And if El wanted to play that game now; fine.

"El, he been kissing *you* for years." he opened. "There's this thing about boys and girls, you know."

El looked back up. Her eyes flashed. *Challenge accepted.* She sent her pillow at him. "Don't try and get clever with me."

"Don't have to try."

"Everyone else has a date for prom already."

Will tilted his head in her direction: *You don't.*

She shrugged: *I don't need one.*

"Why don't *you* go with Mike again?" he said invitingly.

"*You* fit him much better. Look at you two; you're practically connected at the hip." she shot back.

"And the two of you aren't?"

"You're in denial."

"And you're ridiculous."

Thankfully, before pillows started flying back and forth, the Byers' super com flared to life in that moment. They both interrupted their stare-down to look at it. There was a few seconds of static, until Max' voice came through: "Hey, guys? Any of you there?"

The two siblings exchanged a quick glance, then threw out their arms simultaneously. As if pulled by an invisible string, the com jumped off the bed, flew through the room – and landed in El's hand, with Will's only grasping empty air. As usual.

She threw him a victorious smirk. He elbowed her grudgingly. It wasn't really a fair competition; she had years of practice on him.

El pressed the *send* button. "Yes; this is El." she said smugly.

"And Will." Will threw in, not to be left out.

There was a relieved sigh on the other end. "Thank God, you two. Can I crash with you again? Home isn't safe."

Will felt El go tense next to him. He had to suppress the urge to do the same. The competitive air in the room was gone in an instant as a shadow seemed to cast over them. "Your dad?" he asked into the mic, even though he already knew the answer.

"Yeah." There was a long, uncharacteristic silence. Max only ever got this tight-lipped when it concerned her family – her official one, anyway. One particularly bad evening, she'd confessed to Will that his house had become more of a home to her than her own. Since then, a spare key to the Byers house was always in her pocket, so in actual fact she didn't have to ask to come over. She still did anyway. "Do you two have to study? I'm not gonna interrupt; just need some space to breathe without being shouted at."

El kicked away a couple of her school books that had piled up on the floor. Her knuckles on the com were white. "No studying. Bad. We watch a movie." she replied in her old, abrupt style of speaking that only ever came out when she was *really* upset. The pencils on the table started to shake.

Will placed a calming hand on her arm. "I'll make some snacks." he added.

Max gave a too short laugh: "Alright. I'll be over in a bit."

Click. The connection dropped.

"Argh!" El growled, pulling away from Will to pace through the room. Around her, random objects were lifting off the ground, levitating for a few seconds before crashing back down. "Mouth breather! I'm going to..."

"She doesn't want you to." Will stated flatly.

El's anger deflated as quickly as it had come. She plopped down on her bed. "I know." she said miserably. "Won't solve the problem. But I want to do *something*." She looked up to meet his eyes. "That man – he's like Papa. Does what he wants."

"Max can handle him. She's tough."

"Shouldn't have to be. If dad could just lock him up..."

Will nodded. Of course he agreed with her, but they were both only too aware that it wasn't that easy. Somehow, Upside Down demons were a lot easier to fight than the human mouth breathers around them.

El sighed and stood up. "I'm gonna get some crackers. They're her favourite. You pick the movie. Let's cheer her up, at least."

"Maybe we can do more than that." Will suddenly spoke up. He remembered the conversation in the AV room. "Mike had an idea earlier. Maybe we could all use a change of scenery."

El cocked her head curiously.

"I'll let him explain it tomorrow. There's a sleepover planned. I imagine by then he's got a full plan all set and ready to go." Will smiled fondly.

"That would be Mike." El agreed.

4. Friday, Part 1

A/N: First off; thanks a ton to everybody who has taken the time to read and review! It means a lot to me, and even though I don't reply to you directly, I am reading every one of them. I hope you'll enjoy the rest of what is to come as well.

And yes; this is Part 1 of 2. I really didn't plan it like this, but this chapter just kept growing and growing, and I had to make a cut somewhere. If everything works out, you should be seeing Part 2 before the end of the week.

Have a good read!

Friday, Part 1

The last day of the week began with a blinding light.

El awoke with a groan and tried to swat it away, only to realize that it was the sun streaming in through her window. Why was it doing that? It shouldn't do that. She always slept with the curtains drawn for precisely this reason. Only now that she blinked against the light, one of the curtains definitely wasn't there anymore. Vaguely, she could make out the shape of someone ripping open the other one, making her eyes hurt even more. She groaned and raised her hands. "Stop that!"

"It's seven in the morning. Rise and shine!"

Will's voice sounded strange to her ears. Oddly excited. Had El been remotely awake, she would have probably questioned what he was doing in her room at this ungodly hour. Alas, she wasn't and she didn't.

"Don't care. Lemme sleep."

"El!!!!"

I hate having a sibling, El decided. Not that she really meant it. She

loved Will, she did. When she was frustrated, he could make her feel better just by being in the room. But that didn't mean that he had the right to rob her of her sleep like this; or that she would refrain from murdering him for it.

"El." he kept insisting. "Big day today. Get up."

El grumbled and turned over. "Give me one reason why."

"It's Friday."

She buried her head deeper into the pillow. It wasn't the worst reason, really, but it wasn't enough to top her very comfy bed. "N' better one." she demanded.

"Okay." She heard something ruffle from where he was standing, like a sheet of paper. Will sounded downright giddy: "How about this: there was this envelope in the mail. It looks *very* formal; and it's for you."

That woke her up. "WHAT?!" she exclaimed, throwing open her eyes, then throwing off her blankets and jumping to the floor. At least she thought she did, until the floor gave a pained yelp and lurched beneath her feet. El lost her balance and fell back down on the bed. A mop of dishevelled red hair rose into her field of view, closely followed by the rest of an extremely disgruntled Max. She gave El a look of betrayal, her eyes still clouded over from sleep. "Ow! What the hell, guys?!"

"Sorry." El mustered, before returning her attention to Will. And the red-and-white envelope in his hands. Her heart started beating faster at the sight. "Gimme!" she demanded.

Will carefully stepped around Max and handed her the paper. His grin was obnoxiously wide when she snatched it away from him, but El couldn't care at the moment. Without preamble, she ripped open the envelope and started trailing her eyes across the letter inside. They grew wider and wider the more the words started to make sense to her.

"I had a feeling that would wake you up." Will commented, no longer

bothering to disguise the glee in his voice.

"Good job to that." Max grunted, feeling her stomach tentatively and wincing. "You have a mean kick, El. I'll be sleeping in Will's room from now..." She interrupted herself, probably realizing that neither of the Byers siblings was paying her plight any mind at the moment. "What is that, anyway?"

"Mike? Do I even dare ask?"

Mike stopped stabbing the cereal with his spoon and looked up. His mother was looking at him with apparent worry.

Not entirely unjustified. He knew he had barely been partaking in breakfast; but sue him for being preoccupied with his thoughts. Half of them were dancing around a map of the United States which he had been pouring over the past night; the other half was busy looking forward to the sleepover they'd planned for the evening. Those two topics were demanding enough without trying to make breakfast conversation as well.

Of course, there were also those stray thoughts in his head that wondered how he would keep from kissing his best friend at said sleepover, but he wasn't on speaking terms with that side of his brain at the moment; so shush.

"Is everything alright at school? How was the test yesterday?"

His mother had gradually started to leave him to his own devices as the years passed, but every now and then she would still launch into interrogation mode when she thought he was hiding something. Mike wasn't usually this quiet in the morning; quite the opposite in fact, so of course she got suspicious.

"Sure, yeah, everything is alright." He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring nod, and turned his attention back to the goings on at the table. The rest of the family luckily wasn't as inquisitive: His father's general obliviousness was a blessing, as he was buried behind his newspaper without a care in the world. Mike was willing to bet he didn't even know the name of his Math teacher; much less was aware

that his son had just written a test. Holly, meanwhile, had already finished her breakfast and right now was moving on to stealing Mike's apple.

He snatched it away from her just for the sake of it; he wasn't really hungry. His mother was still looking at him, so he sighed and added "Math was fine, I think. Hanson used completely different equations than what we practiced, but that's just what he does. It worked out." In truth, Mike was just glad that that subject was behind him now, and didn't care much about the results at the moment. Belatedly, he added "Oh, and the others wanted to come over tonight. For a little, uhm, studying and hanging out, you know. We'd just be in the basement, as usual."

"*Studying*, hmm?" Karen raised her hands defensively when she saw him about to protest. "Just saying. It's your grades, not mine."

Holly perked up for the first time. "Is Will gonna be there?" she asked excitedly.

Mike couldn't help but smile. "Yes."

A noticeable blush spread over her face. "Can I come down, too?"

"Nope. Sorry; only grown-ups."

"I am grown up!"

"You're a squirt, lil sis. And it's *our* sleepover. I doubt Will'll have time to give you a piggy-back ride."

Holly turned a deeper shade of red; from embarrassment or anger Mike couldn't tell. She stomped her foot on the ground: Anger, probably. "That's not fair! You just want him all for yourself!" With that, she pushed back her chair and left the room; not without flipping Mike off on the way.

"No foul gestures, Holly!" Ted Wheeler reprimanded her back as it vanished around the corner.

Karen raised an eyebrow, looking more confused than annoyed. She turned back to Mike. "What's going on between you two? What was

that about Will?"

Mike shrugged. "She has a crush on him." he said directly. Her remark had –probably unwittingly – hit a little too close to home. If Holly played mean sibling, he would, too.

His mother's eyebrows rose even higher. "Does she now? How did you get that idea?"

"She gives him puppy eyes. And she's on, like, cloud nine when he says something nice." *Which is pretty much everything that leaves Will's mouth, really – stop that!*

"Hmm." Karen thought for a moment, unaware of her son's inner dispute. "Does he know?"

Mike coughed. "Don't think so."

Her face brightened. "Then why don't you let her join you today, if she wants it so badly. I don't think Will will mind."

"But...!"

"Mike; I want you and Holly to get along, alright? I don't know why, but ever since Nancy moved out, you've been in each other's hair constantly. Perhaps you should spend some time together and just – don't roll your eyes at me, Mike Wheeler!"

"Does it have to be today?" Mike was aware that he sounded whiny. He was vehemently opposed to the idea of his little sister interrupting the one evening of the week they could spend together. Holly had a way of gobbling up everybody's time – especially Will's – since for some reason they all found her cute beyond belief. "Mom, she's just going to make heart eyes at him all evening."

That was the wrong thing to say. After that at the latest, protest was futile. His mother let out that terribly nostalgic *I-remember-when-I-was-young* sigh. "That's what crushes are like. Even if it's not mutual; your sister is happy, isn't she?" Karen smiled fondly. "No wonder. I've seen how he talks to her. Will is a nice kid; so just let her have a good time."

"Yeah." Mike replied curtly, trying to ignore the swooping of his stomach. All this talk of Will and crushes wasn't helping his emotional state in the slightest.

He blamed Holly for this, too. Will babysitting her was what had started all this confusion, and the reason why he was now actually in a very similar state to his sister; inclined to blush when just his name popped up. Mike groaned inwardly. Yes; he really was fucked.

How in the world had he got here?

Breathing out deeply, Mike tried his best to bring everything inside him into some kind of order. He reviewed the last two days (it had been just two days?!) with as objective a view as he could muster. If he could just focus on the facts, maybe this would start to make some sort of sense.

Okay, so; he liked Will. He might have a tiny little crush on him, even. He could at least be honest enough with himself to admit that.

How and why that could have happened, Mike still had no idea. Sure; Will was his oldest friend and probably the nicest person on the planet, but until a few days ago, Mike had been pretty sure he liked girls. He'd *dated* girls. Well; one girl. But the point still stood. Girls were pretty and soft and had long hair and beautiful eyes. That was what Mike was into; no question about it.

Except that Will was also pretty, and also had long hair and beautiful eyes; so maybe Mike's brain was just a little confused.

The problem was that it just didn't have the time to be confused at the moment. It was now only four months, two weeks and three days until Will would leave for New York (yes; he may have counted), and Mike didn't want to waste a second of that time with being weird about it. What he definitely *wasn't* going to do was spring this sudden crush on his best friend at this time.

Mike wanted to enjoy their time to the fullest, and he wanted Will to enjoy it, too. Yes. That was what he was going to do. It had taken hours of late-night pouring over a map to come to that resolution, but now it stood. Somewhat.

Or perhaps you should just tell Will and get it over with? the stubborn voice in his head made itself heard again. *It's only going to get weirder if you keep avoiding it.*

And how is anything I could possible say about it going to make it less weird? Mike demanded.

The voice had no answer to that. Neither, unfortunately, did Mike.

So: Be normal; don't stare; make sure everyone has a good time. That was the game plan for this evening.

At least he and Will wouldn't be alone, so it was unlikely he would do something stupid. For once, everyone had found time to sleep over, despite all having exams the next week. It looked like Mike wasn't the only one who was painfully aware of how little time they had left. He couldn't say whether he took comfort in that.

5. Friday, Part 2

Here comes part two. And it's:

- still ridiculously long
- filled with adorable awkwardness
- actually proof-read for once (Yey!)
- a little bit evil. Sorry about that.

Have a good read!

Friday, Part 2

Lucas wasn't having a good day so far. And it didn't show any signs of getting better.

For a start; his sister had spontaneously decided to be even more obnoxious than usual this morning, which led to a rather heated dispute over their cereal bowls. Then, once he'd escaped the house, he'd found that his bike had a flat tyre and spent a good ten minutes fixing the thing. Also, it was bloody cold outside. To say, then, that he was in a sour mood when he finally cycled onto the school yard would have been an understatement.

And now, to top it off, he had discovered that he was currently missing his pencil case, his History essay (due today), several of his books and, really, any motivation for being at Hawkins High at all.

And also, you know, his girlfriend, who would have been able to remind him of these things, if she were here. Which she wasn't. Which was weird. Lucas grimaced. In fact; there was a distinct lack of his friends, now that he looked around. At least Will and El should have turned up by now. They usually were the early birds of the group.

"Where is everyone?" Dustin wanted to know accordingly when he

arrived in his run-down car.

"Not here." Lucas stated the obvious. Maybe it came out a bit too snarky, but he wasn't feeling like being helpful at the moment. At least now he had someone to complain to.

"And here I thought you were hiding them in your pocket. Thanks for the info." Dustin shot back, likewise sounding more terse than usual. Good to know Lucas wasn't the only one who was over and done with this week. Man; they needed a break. There was just this one more day to get through...

Though, that might be easier said than done if Lucas judged the situation correctly; since the majority of Hawkins High seemed to have taken crazy pills. Friday was usually the day where everyone started to relax a bit, but apparently today not everyone had gotten the memo. Maybe it had something to do with exam period, or the fact that the school year was almost over. Or maybe it was because of prom coming up. Regardless, tension and testosterone were running high, and it felt like the smallest comment could set something off. In the background, a group of juniors had already dissolved into a medium sized brawl.

Lucas sighed. It was going to be one of those days.

"Juniors." Dustin commented. He threw Lucas a sideways glance. "We weren't like that, were we?"

"Don't think so. We were disciplined and orderly." Lucas confirmed, watching the pile of flailing limbs. By now a teacher had come to intervene, so far without effect. It was moments like this that really made Lucas appreciate that he could leave this place behind very soon. He was looking forward to seeing something different than evil dimensions and squabbling kids for once. Especially, he thought with a grin, his mood lifting a little, since his girlfriend would be along for the ride.

"What's going on?" Mike's voice asked next to him, snapping him out of his daydreaming. He hadn't even heard him arrive. Lucas quickly gave him a once over. His friend looked a lot better than yesterday, but that wasn't saying much. He seemed to have lost his weird

nervous tick from before, and was all around looking a lot livelier. Maybe his odd behaviour yesterday had just been due to sleep deprivation.

Mike was scanning the yard, evidently looking for the rest of the group. "Where is everyone?"

"Hey, that was my line!" Dustin complained. "But you're right; it bears repeating. I've never seen our telepath late for school; Will neither. Well, Mad Max not so much, but whatever." he shrugged. "Has anybody called in sick?"

"Haven't heard anything." Lucas replied.

"This is getting suspicious. Think your girlfriend has already run off on you?"

"Har har."

"It's okay; you had a good run. If you need to talk, I'll be here."

"I'll show you talk, you..."

"Guys, I think I see them." Mike interrupted their bickering, pointing up the driveway. Lucas stopped half-way of trying to get his friend into a headlock and looked up.

Sure enough, there they were. El, Will and Max were approaching on their bikes and skateboard respectively. And even from this distance, Lucas could see that all three of them were grinning like madmen.

Oh dear. That spelled trouble.

The strange vibe that the late arrivals were giving off wasn't lost on his friends either. "Hey, guys?" Mike greeted cautiously once they came to a stop.

"Hey." echoed three excited voices.

Lucas caught his girlfriend's eyes, mouthing a silent "*What's going on?*" She just smiled and nodded at El, which didn't help to clear things up at all.

"You seem oddly cheerful." Dustin commented.

The terrifying grins only widened. Then, before anyone knew what was happening, El had thrown her arms around Dustin, twirling him around in a happy little dance. Dustin was so caught off guard that he just let it happen. For once in his life, he seemed to be lost for words, and Lucas couldn't really blame him. What in the world was happening?

Quite a few people on the yard had stopped what they were doing and stared in their direction. Lucas glanced at Max once again. His girlfriend didn't seem to find El's action at all alarming, and neither did Will. Mike, meanwhile, gave a profound "Uhm...?", staring at the scene. All things considered, he summed it up pretty well.

When El let go, she was positively beaming. And completely ignoring Dustin's flabbergasted look. "I've got it! IU's accepted me!" she squealed, jumping giddily up and down. Then, because everyone was still staring at her like she was speaking Greek: "They accepted me! I can start studying in the fall!"

That broke the spell.

"YES!" Mike shouted, not caring about the volume, or the weirded-out looks they received from the students around them. He was the first to reach El and picked her up, spinning her around. "I told you! I told you!"

"Woohooo!" El yelled into the air.

A heartbeat later, the two were caught at the middle of a knot of arms, legs and congratulations as the others piled up around them, shouting incoherent words and drowning each other out. Lucas had caught El's shoulder; or at least he was pretty sure it was hers. It wasn't a 100%, with all the limbs being intertwined with each other. Not that it mattered that much. El was off to college!

Sure; it had taken a lot of tutoring and more than a little frustration to get here, but those were minor details, really. His face pressed against somebody's elbow, Lucas grinned proudly. Friday-frustration? What was that? This had just turned into the best day of the week.

Then, suddenly, a new voice spoke up: "Hey, guys. What's so funny?"

Lucas disentangled his head from the group and looked up. And saw an older student whom he had never met before standing there.

He was at least a foot taller than Lucas and built like a mountain; with long blonde hair resting atop a surprisingly small head. Lucas was tempted to take a step back to get a better view. The mountain looked old enough to be a teacher; chin stubble and all, despite wearing a student's uniform. And right now he was intruding on their space, without any reason that Lucas could see.

"Hi?" he said suspiciously.

"Hey, man." the other smiled. His hand fell on Lucas' shoulder, and it felt like a hammer trying to pound him into the ground. "You looked like you were having a great time. Care to let me join in?"

Now the others looked up, too. Max, on the far end of the group, saw the giant standing in front of her boyfriend and immediately turned on her death-glare. It was really impressive how she could switch from pretty smile to that from one second to the next. Not that Lucas could blame her. They hadn't had any trouble with bullies for a long time – not since his girlfriend had broken the last one's wrist – but there were still plenty of jerks walking around Hawkins High. And this guy was acting a little bit too friendly for his liking.

When nobody replied to his question, the senior retracted his hand and moved on as if nothing had happened. He casually turned to El. "You have a beautiful laugh." he smiled.

"Thanks." El replied. Her expression was near unreadable as always, but Lucas thought he caught a sense of irritation. The guy was leaning close, as if they were dating or something. Well; there was of course the (very slim) possibility that they were; Lucas didn't exactly keep tabs on all his friends' love life. But he didn't think that was the case. The look El was giving the guy was definitely not friendly.

Then he threw an arm around El's shoulder, and that was the last confirmation that he *definitely* had not met her before.

Lucas expected a body to fly within the next couple of seconds, but nothing happened. El just looked up her suitor (who was at least a head taller) with a deadpan expression. "Who are you?"

"Name's Greg, Greg Williams." came the proud answer, like that should mean something to them. His arm sneaked a little lower. Too low. "And I'd like you to be my date for the prom. How does that sound, pretty?"

"Terrific." she commented, with no inflection at all. To anyone who knew her, it was her 'Better get to a safe distance quick'-voice.

As for the others; the grinding of multiple sets of teeth was audible. There was the not-so-distinct possibility that one of the Party members would throw themselves at Greg Williams after his last statement, and Lucas wasn't sure who'd be the first. At the moment, he was kind of inclined to lead by example.

The guy only grinned at El's reply, unfazed and apparently completely tone-deaf. "Thought so. Cool. You know; you're the only person I've asked."

"Never would have guessed."

"Yep. Not to brag, but there's suitors lining up."

"Interesting."

"Girl of few words; I like it! I'll even give you a ride in my car; that's how much I like it. Just need an address. Where will I show up?"

"I don't know. Where will you show up?"

Max badly suppressed a chuckle.

Maybe it was slowly dawning on Greg that he was being shut down. His expression darkened, the pleasant smile vanishing. He yanked at El's arm roughly. "Listen, you...!"

The entire Party took a step forward simultaneously. Lucas set down his bag, freeing his hands. To his left, Mike's hands clenched into fists. To his right, Max' chuckle had morphed into a growl. Which,

yes; that was just as terrifying as it sounded. Any half-intelligent person would have taken a retreat at this point.

The idiot just looked up in irritation. "What now?" he demanded.

"Now fuck off." Will growled, before anyone else had the chance. When Lucas glanced at him in surprise (Will never cursed), there were literal sparks twitching around his friend's fingers. He was staring up at the senior with an expression that spelled murder.

The other's face twisted into an ugly grimace. "What did you just say, pipsqueak?!" He let go of El's arm and took a step towards Will. Then he finally seemed to realize that there were currently five people staring him down, the angry telepath to his right not included. He faltered uncertainly.

El stepped between him and Will. "What he said." she affirmed. Her voice was cold enough to freeze over the Atlantic. Twice. "Fuck off."

Greg's glanced from her to her line of angry friends, and made the sensible choice: he took a step backwards. "Freaks!" he hissed in retreat.

The next thing Lucas knew, the guy's bag had burst open and the contents were merrily spilling on the floor.

No one made a sound. Greg Williams stood in shock for a few seconds. Then he hastily knelt down, scrambling to pick everything up under the eyes of his colleagues who were standing a few feet away. His face was beet red.

The tension dissolved. The Party broke into a collective laugh and turned to El. The telepath just shook her head and turned to Will. Who in turn flushed almost as red as the would-be bully. "He had it coming!" he defended himself, glaring at Greg's back.

Right. They had a second telepath in the Party now. Lucas still hadn't fully gotten used to that fact.

Dustin guffawed and slapped Will across the back. "Awesome!"

"Cheeky." Max added.

"Mmph." El commented. "I wanted to do the same."

"But I was faster." Will countered, sending her a grin.

"This time."

"Okay, you two dangerous Sith-teens-in-training, this isn't a contest. Tone it down." Dustin felt compelled to intervene. What he received for his efforts were two casual flip-offs. The Byers siblings grinned at each other and marched off towards the school building.

"What have we created?" Dustin muttered.

Max snorted, giving her boyfriend a meaningful grin. "Nice way to start the day." she stated. Then she followed after the two.

Lucas had to agree. Apparently, Fridays weren't actually that bad. El had really rubbed off on Will. Or maybe it was the other way around. Either way; they both were a lot more – reckless, was probably the right word. Or *awesome*, as Dustin had so rightly put it. He chuckled to himself.

Then he noticed that Mike hadn't moved from his spot; staring after Will and El with an odd expression. If Lucas hadn't known better, he'd have thought his friend looked besotted.

Oh Lord; not this again. I thought we passed this stage. "Mike? You alright?" he prompted sharply.

Mike started, eyes flinching away from the pair and towards Lucas. He cleared his throat. "Ah. Yep. Completely fine. Yeah. Let's go." And off he went.

Lucas eyed his back warily. He'd known Mike Wheeler for over a decade now, and he'd gotten used to a modicum of acting weird; but those absent looks he was sprouting lately were a little bit worrying. And the way he'd just looked after El... Something was going on there, and apparently nobody had bothered to tell him yet. He gave a mental shrug and followed the others: he would find out. Not to flatter himself; but he was good at that sort of thing.

"And that's when I realized I needed an expert." Mike Wheeler concluded.

It was a rushed admission; almost lost in him pacing up and down the length of his room, chewing on his fingernails. He was prone to nervous behaviour like that, but this time it seemed to be something serious, judging by his flustered expression. And by the fact that he'd called for help with his problem – not on the Party's frequency, mind you, but on their private one. That was a first, and as such it was – well, intriguing.

Finally, Mike stopped pacing and fully turned to her. „Like, an expert in relationship stuff." he specified.

Max Mayfield took a moment to pointedly look around his bedroom. It was empty, safe for the two of them. "Well? Where is he, then?"

He just stared at her. "Max, you know what I mean! I didn't ask for this either. This is weird."

That was certainly true. Had someone ever told Max that Mike Wheeler of all people would someday come to her for relationship advice, she'd have shepherded them out of her house, along with the recommendation of a good psychiatrist. But that was exactly what had happened a few minutes ago: without warning, immediately after school, Mike had called her on a private frequency, and practically begged her to come over because he needed urgent help. With a crush.

Because apparently that was how strange this day would get.

Mike groaned, putting his face in his hands. "Dammit. I'm in a really bad spot, okay?"

"Usually I'm not exactly your person of confidence." Max pointed out. From what she understood so far, she was completely unqualified for this conversation: After all, she hated talking about feelings, and she knew for a fact that the boy opposite her did too. And while Mike might no longer hate her guts like in the beginning, they hadn't exactly had many heartfelt conversations over the years. So she had absolutely no idea what might have prompted this sudden change of

things.

"I know. But right now, you're the only girl in the Party who has experience with relationship stuff other..." He faltered and blushed.

"... other than the girl you used to date." she finished for him. She had to suppress a grin. It probably wouldn't have been very appropriate, given the fact that Mike seemed to be in the middle of a crisis. "You could ask Lucas, too."

Mike's jaw set. "I am not. Asking. Lucas."

She shrugged. "I hear Dustin's had a bit of experience with the other gender, too."

"Max! This is difficult enough without your input!"

"I thought you wanted my advice?" Max asked innocently. *Oh; teasing him is fun!* Mike appeared to be convinced she was his only option at the moment, and she intended to take full advantage of that state of affairs. His embarrassment was absolutely adorable. Why had she never done this before?!

There was no witty comeback, just a very weary looking Mike Wheeler sinking down on his bed and pressing both hands to his face.

"Okay, okay; I'll stop." Max relented. She forcefully pried the hands away from his face. "So; who is this terrible crush on?"

Mike mumbled something unintelligible.

"Scuse me?"

Mike squirmed in his seat. He wouldn't look at her. "Will." came the barely audible admission.

Max blinked, taken off guard. "Come again? I thought you just said you had a crush on – Will? Like, Byers Will?"

"I – did."

"Oh."

"Oh?!" Mike repeated. "That's it?!" He stared up at her. Max didn't know how to read his expression. Defiant? Nervous? Afraid of judgement? It looked like a mix of all of the above.

Max realized she was staring at him and tried to reign her look of surprise back in. Honestly, she didn't know what to think. She didn't really have a problem with gay people existing; that wasn't the part that had her stumped. She had something of a feeling that Will might be gay, seeing how he wasn't big on girls, but he had never talked about it, so she hadn't brought it up either. If that was the case, it didn't really change how she felt about him. In fact, when one of the jerks at school called her friend slurs, she was the first to step in and throw them right back in their face – along with her fists, should the need arise.

Still; Mike Wheeler announcing that he had the hots for Will Byers came a little bit out of nowhere, so sue her for being surprised.

"Max? You're not saying anything."

He was right about that. "Uh, sorry. Just a little – surprised, is all."

His expression relaxed a little, maybe because realizing that she wasn't going to turn on him. He crossed his arms defiantly. "Not more surprised than I am. Believe me."

"When – oh wow, okay, uhm – when did *that* happen?" She frowned suspiciously. "Wait. You're not kidding me here, are you?"

"No! This is fucking serious, that's what I'm trying to tell you!"

"Okay, Jeez, calm down!"

The pacing started again. "He was babysitting Holly a few days ago, and since then I just can't stop thinking about him! I don't know why I've never noticed before; it's always been right in front of me, right? Just, how he smiles and how he laughs and how he's always so bloody good..."

Oh wow. "That sounds like a little more than a crush." Max

commented.

Mike whirled around so suddenly that he startled her. "More? What do you mean; more?!" There was a note of panic in his voice. His eyes were wide as saucers, and Max knew this look and what it meant. Mike was entering that state where he either had to be talked to in the gentlest of terms or punched right on the head in order for him to calm back down. Nothing else would work; she knew that from experience.

Seeing how the former was Will's speciality and he wasn't here, Max' course of action really didn't need to be explained.

"Ow!" Mike rubbed his forehead. "Are you cra..."

"Will." Max cut him off matter-of-factly. "So; you like him. That correct?"

"Uhm – yeah." He was red as a tomato.

"Even though you've been besties for ages. And even though you also liked El."

"I know; I know! I mean; I don't know. How I can feel that way for for him now. I don't know. It just, like, happened."

Max looked him once over, trying to fit what she saw into some kind of frame she could understand. Then she shook her head. "You are super confusing, you know that?"

Some of his usual annoyance seeped back into his expression. "Thanks a lot, Max."

"That was a compliment." she clarified. "I like surprises. But, just for the record, I always had a hunch that Will liked you. In a roundabout way, I called it."

"I didn't always like..." Mike stopped abruptly, mid-sentence. "What did you just say?!"

"Don't freak out again!" Max pleaded. "I'm not saying you are Romeo and Juliet. I just noticed that Will'd sometimes look at you like –

well, like you'd hung the stars. And you didn't seem to mind." In fact, at the beginning she'd thought for sure that something was going on between the two, what with how close they were always standing to each other. Later she'd come to understand that that was just how the Party worked: they had no qualms with openly displaying affection for each other, whether that was meant in a friendly or a more-than-friendly way.

Now, though, she was wondering if her original interpretation hadn't been right on the money after all.

Evidently, she had just delivered the next shock to the person she was supposed to be helping, because Mike was floundering. "He doesn't... He didn't... We're just friends; that's why."

"But – now you want it to be more, right?"

His red face was answer enough.

This is weird, Max' mind stated. *But, they'd kinda fit together, wouldn't they?* also Max' mind contradicted. And she kind of had to agree with it. In all the time she'd known him, Will had never shown any interest in dating. Maybe there was a concrete reason for that. Perhaps that meant that the attraction being mutual wasn't as far-fetched as Mike seemed to think. And the truth was; he could make Will smile without even trying; always made him happy. The two of them would probably do anything for each other. Hell; they had.

Max sighed. She'd never admit that to anyone, but sometimes looking at them together made her kind of sad. Will was probably her best friend, but he and the boy who was anxiously looking at her right now shared a connection that she could never match. As she saw it, whether that was love or friendship didn't really matter so much.

She pulled herself back to the present, looking at Mike. "If I help you with this, you know you'll have to endure my smug comments for the rest of your life, right?"

He nodded, resigning himself to his fate. "I can deal with that, as long as you help me get this mess under control somehow."

Max gleefully sanded her hands together. She adopted a business-like posture. "Okay then. First: get that frown off and smile. Helps a lot with the likeability. Second; let's discuss the possibilities how you can best woo Byers tonight..."

"Can we *please* not use that word?!"

Ding dong.

The Wheeler's front door was thrown open so suddenly that it actually made Will jump. The snow falling from the grey sky hadn't even had any time to settle on his coat in the time since he'd jumped off his bike.

He may or may not have been daydreaming a bit – he could afford to, since Mike was notorious for always being on the opposite side of the house whenever somebody rang – so it did surprise him more than a little when Mike stood in the doorway less than two seconds after his finger had touched the bell. He looked out of breath, his never-quite-straight black hair jutting off even more than usual, like he'd repeatedly run his hands through it. Will took all that in in under a second, exactly how long it took to get over his surprise.

"Ah; hi Mike."

"Hey, Will." his friend smiled brightly.

"You startled me. Are you okay?"

Mike leaned against the doorframe, trying (and failing) to look relaxed. "Sure. Yes. Perfectly fine. Why would you think otherwise?"

"Cause you look like you just ran a marathon." Will replied, grinning.

"In other words; fit and dedicated?" Mike asked with a hopeful and hopelessly crooked half-smile.

Somewhere in the house, Will heard Max snort. "Smooth, Wheeler!"

Mike flushed a deep shade of red. Will cocked his eyebrows questioningly, but before he had a chance to comment on her

statement, he was unceremoniously ushered inside. Max, who was busying herself with something in the kitchen, threw him a short wave in greeting. In the back of his mind, Will registered that she was wearing a suspiciously smug expression, but he was already down in the basement before he could think twice about that.

After years spent down here in this room, Will could have found his way around blindfolded – even when factoring in that Mike consistently changed the layout; ditching old toys and furniture, bringing in new stuff and re-arranging everything constantly. The one thing that never changed, though, was the ancient couch in the corner and the TV sitting comfortably opposite it. Mike was too nostalgic to change that. Will loved that about his friend.

At the moment, his friend was acting hectic; racing back and forth between couch and fridge, putting up coke, water and chips; setting up a map of the US; re-arranging the chairs and carpet. When Will asked how he could help, he just waved vaguely, saying that he was practically finished anyway. Then he proceeded to drag the table closer to the couch and went up the stairs, saying he wanted to get more – 'something'. Word for word what he said. Will could feel his lips twitch, dying to smile, but he held his own. Mike's unwarranted nervousness was really quite cute sometimes, and he practically had to bite his tongue to stop himself from saying that out loud.

Max walked in, grabbed a rolling pin and left again, wearing a casual expression all the way. Too casual. Will narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. He knew that look, and it meant that she was up to something. That warranted keeping a close look on her for the rest of the evening, lest he be the butt of some practical joke. Max wasn't above doing that, even after a harrowing week like this.

With a sigh, Will sank into the couch, while the thing threatened to eat him as always. He patted it fondly. The couch was even older than his and Mike's friendship; older than the boys themselves, probably; and there were a lot of memories connected to it. By now, the thing was old, beaten and battered, and dangerously leaning to one side from years of teenage boys jumping on it with far too much enthusiasm. It smelled of salt and coke and the Party. Will breathed in deeply.

"What are you smiling about?"

He blinked at Mike, who was hovering a few feet away and looking at him curiously. Will shook his head. He hadn't even been aware he was smiling. "Nothing in particular."

Every now and then, he just had these moments of clarity where he realized just how much of his idea of home was this room. But even Mike would probably call that cheesy, so he never said it out loud. "It's nothing."

"Just cause, uh, it looks nice. You. Smiling, I mean."

Will giggled. "Okay. Thanks?"

"You're welcome. Yeah." Mike opened his mouth like he wanted to say something else. Then he closed it and went back to his organizing. Will watched him go about it with renewed interest. There was an energy to his friend today that he hadn't seen in a while; evident in every little movement he made. It was reminiscent of how he could get during one of their campaigns, when he got so focused on their mission that he sometimes forgot to clue them in and, in his excitement, skipped two steps ahead in the story. This time, the smile that stole onto Will's face was fully conscious.

"Mike?"

His head snapped up. "Yeah, Will?"

You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I love just being with you; love being your friend, and I don't ever want that to change.

"You moved that chair three times now."

"Oh." He glanced down at the object in questions, and reluctantly set it back down in its original position. "Sorry. It's – I just want everything to be perfect, I guess."

Will reached for Mike's wrists and pulled him down on the couch with him, forcing him to sit still for a moment. He looked oddly tense. Will nudged him gently. "It's going to be great. You think too much."

Mike coughed, his hands fidgeting nervously. He gave an embarrassed smile. "Yeah. I- I get that a lot. Sorry."

"No; I guess it's what makes you Mike, Mike."

"Gee. Thanks."

"That was a compliment."

"You really need to work on those, Will. You're lucky I'm not easily offended."

"Very lucky."

"Was that sarcastic?"

"No."

Mike let out an overly tragic sigh, eyes glinting humorously. "Will! You're spending far too much time with El. I remember when we could have a conversation without you mocking me, you know. Those were easier times."

"Not mocking. Deserved, friendly teasing." Will corrected. "And I'll have you know, El doesn't have a monopoly on sarcasm in our family."

"I don't have a what?" asked El, walking into the basement. Her hair and coat were covered in snowflakes; apparently the storm outside had gotten worse. "Whatever it is, I have more of it than you."

Mike pointed an indignant finger at her, causing El to frown in confusion. "See?! That's what I mean!"

Will turned his head away to keep Mike from seeing his grin. Whatever tension had been in Mike's shoulders previously, it had evaporated somewhere during their exchange and now he was merrily trading arguments and rebuttals with El, her making faces and he making them right back. Then they both turned to him and rolled their eyes in sync: *Isn't she/he ridiculous?*

I have the best friends in the world, Will decided. Not that that was a

novelty, but there were moments when it became especially clear. Also probably the craziest friends, too; looking at them now. "Get along, you guys. The evening has only just started." he admonished gently.

"Damn right it has!" That was Mike. "Let's make it a memorable one!"

Will nodded, smiling at his friend's enthusiasm. He'd been looking forward to this evening since Wednesday. It would be great. All he hoped for was that he wouldn't drift off and accidentally make something fly again like last time. Then, it had been the couch (with Lucas still on it), and while everyone had laughed about it afterwards, it hadn't been at all funny at the time.

Speaking of; Lucas and Max were just coming down the stairs, each carrying a tray full of self-made burgers. Except for Dustin, everyone was thus accounted for. And, like they had coordinated it, Dustin's voice came through the supercom in that exact moment. His car had abruptly died in the weather; he was going to be late.

"I'm not waiting." Max declared, plopping down on the couch and attacking her food. The others exchanged glances, shrugged and followed her example. They were seniors in high school, and they needed to replenish lost energy. There'd be enough left for the late arrival. Probably.

Mike swallowed his bite and looked around. He rubbed his hands, then spread them dramatically. "So, as the majority is present; why don't I start revealing my grand plan?"

Will (along with rest of the room) rolled his eyes at his antics and aimed to shove his friends shoulder, but ended up squeezing it instead. "Get on it then, oh great dungeon master."

Mike sat aside his plate and reached for the maps he had already prepared on the desk, focusing all his attention on that and not on the soft hand that radiated warmth through his shoulder and all the way down to his chest. All things considered, he was doing a good job, he thought. With a practiced shake of the wrist, Mike unrolled the first map and glanced at the expectant faces all around him. He

cleared his throat and summoned his best dungeon master voice:

"So then, fellow adventurers; this is the plan. We are gathered here today to plot our escape from this dark and dreary place that holds us captive; a break for freedom that I'm sure you all will agree we have earned."

Collective head nodding. "We can all agree on that." said Lucas.

"Does this plan include skipping finals?" Max muttered.

Mike shook his head gravely. "I'm afraid that is not up for debate, Mad Max. But as soon as those dreaded battles are fought, we will be free to go wherever we please, and we shall take full advantage of it. Now; as it happens it has come to my attention that you, Mad Max, and your tag-along are already planning to leave Hawkins town behind very soon?"

"Tag-along?!" Lucas repeated indignantly.

Max thoroughly ignored him. Her eyes looking at Mike were sparkling mischievously. "That is correct, Mr. Flowery Speech. What art thou getting at, if my person might inquire?"

Mike snorted. "That was a terrible Shakespeare." he stated dryly. Then, back to the dungeon master: "In your endeavour to see the world, I'm sure it would be of great help if you had a cache of prior, first-hand knowledge about the places you aim to visit; correct? Well; as luck would have it, I have an idea how to provide you with exactly that..."

"You're talking about a road trip." Lucas butted in, sharp as ever. "After we're done here. So that's what you've been up to?" He gave Mike a suspicious look.

"Which sounds like a nice idea." Max added.

El huffed a breath out of her nose in amusement, exchanging a quick look with Will.

Mike gave a resigned sigh. He switched back to his normal voice. "I was planning to build it up a little bit more; thanks, Lucas. But yes;

that is the basic idea."

"You could have said that in one sentence." El complained.

"Not everyone is as economic with words as you, El." Will nudged her before Mike could retort. He threw him a little wink: "And it was a very good build up."

The warmth inside him was all over his chest by now. Mike looked at his friend gratefully. "Thanks, Will. Now, the negative input aside; what do you all think?"

"I'm in."

"Yeah."

"Sounds perfect."

"When do we start?" came the chorus from around the table.

"Right then." Mike grinned. He hadn't expected anything different. He pointed at the map on his lap: "I've already thought a little about how we could go about this. Not much; just a bit to get us started."

Everyone leaned forward to get a better look.

Lucas looked up first. "You've already marked, like, two dozen places."

"I did a little bit of research." Mike shrugged. "Look; if we drive up to the lakes first, we can have a slower, relaxed start before we move on to Chicago or Minneapolis. Then it's big city time and we could stay for maybe a few days. I've thought we'd take a northern route and then swing around at around Montana..."

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Will and El exchange another glance. He raised an eyebrow: "What?"

"Nothing." both said simultaneously. They looked at each other again and giggled. "Carry on."

Mike got the feeling that he was the butt of a private joke, and he

thought he could guess how it went. He had a penchant for overthinking/over-planning everything; he was fully aware of that, too. So was the rest of the party; apparently. Mike crossed his arms spitefully. "No, no; I wouldn't want to prescribe our entire trip for you. Let's hear *your* ideas, first."

Maybe saying that was a mistake, because after that it was a mayhem of suggestions, plans and to-be-carried-out activities.

Half-way through planning the first half of the journey, while Mike was trying to dissuade El from her stubborn attempts to fit in a 'short trip' to Yellowstone (that on its own would have taken them weeks), Dustin came in, white-haired and smiling like a Cheshire Cat. He didn't seem to question why all of them were huddled around a map. And, upon being questioned himself about his obvious glee, he broke the news that he was as of this afternoon tutoring Amelia Ritter.

"No way she actually asked you!" Lucas blurted out in response.

"Yes, my friend, she did!" Dustin grinned.

That caused a few blissful sighs from the other boys, including Mike. Amelia was the Hawkins equivalent of Princess Leia: short, with hair bigger than her head and arranged into a different hair style every day. And on another level of beautiful. Mike, like everyone else, had spent many a day staring after her when she walked through the hallways.

See? He liked girls. Just give his brain a couple of days to remember that.

Then Will giggled at all their probably comically blissful looks, and Mike's brain protested that it actually didn't really want to remember quite yet.

Max huffed. "I don't see what all the hype is about. Bunch of ridiculous hair; big deal. That girl isn't even smart, or she wouldn't need Dustin to tutor her."

"She's angelic." Dustin rhapsodized, finally shaking the snow out of his hair. "The most beautiful girl ever."

"Yeah." Lucas said, and then "Ow!" when his girlfriend swatted him across the back of the head. "Those present not included, of course!"

"It's a bit late for tutoring now, isn't it?" Will threw in.

Dustin just winked suggestively. Then his eyes darted to the table and lit up like it was Christmas. "Is that a burger?!"

That diverted his focus in an instant, and put an end to the Amelia-distraction. With everyone thus being settled in, the evening could begin.

In spite of Mike's best intentions, the road trip planning kind of fell to the wayside after a while. The map was still consulted on and off whenever anyone had new ideas to add to their plan; but in between that there was a hotchpotch of other random activities the group felt like doing now that they finally had the time. There wasn't any D&D (Mike didn't know where he would have found the time for it), but the Wheeler's basement had accumulated plenty other games over the years, so there was no risk of boredom.

During a heated game of poker, Mike looked up to see Holly climbing down into the basement, her cheeks red with excitement. She was carrying a hot platter laden with cookies, courtesy of Karen. That instantly made her Dustin's favourite person in the room, but Holly was savvy enough to ignore his puppy dog eyes and keep the tray well out of his reach. When she set it down in front of the Byers siblings instead, Will gave her a fond smile, and Mike just knew his sister was blushing even with her back turned to him. He shuffled around to get a better view. The look his little sister was giving his best friend was one of pure adoration. He didn't seem to notice, or if he did he didn't let on. While El started murdering her cookies, Will took the time to ruffle through Holly's hair fondly. And Holly – who *hated* that whenever anyone else tried it – positively beamed.

Two days ago Mike would have found that funny. Now, he could understand his sister's feelings perfectly. In fact, he would very gladly have traded places with her. And wasn't that a depressing thought?

An elbow landed in his sides and Mike turned back to the game. Max nudged him again, looking at him meaningfully. While to everyone

else it had to look like a demand to play his part; to Mike it was a pretty clear *"Dude; your baby sister has better moves than you! Get on it!"*

Mike threw her a glare and stubbornly placed his bet on the table. Dustin called that he was bluffing. To be honest, Mike wasn't really sure if he was; he hadn't paid attention to the last two cards being revealed. Why couldn't Will's laughter be a little less mesmerizing?

Try to catch him on his own. Help him with something. Then eye contact; lean in; kiss.

That had been Max' first suggestion, and at the time it had sounded pretty good. Simple and to the point. Now, though? Now Mike's nerves were running rampant like they had joined a marathon, and he doubted he'd manage a straight sentence in such a situation, let alone a kiss. Maybe it would work later. Why did this relationship stuff have to be so complicated?!

He thought of Max' second suggestion (*"Just tell him, for fuck's sake!"*) and decided to postpone that, too. Perhaps indefinitely.

Catching Will alone for a moment proved to be impossible. Will went up to get new drinks twice, but both times Mike was busy looking over the map, so he really wasn't in any position to follow him. Really. Even if Max 'accidentally' kicked him about a dozen times underneath the table, not so subtly alerting him to the opportunity. The jabs got increasingly more forceful, until finally the redhead threw him a "Fine; I'm done with this." look and turned back to her own boyfriend, ignoring him completely. Mike wished he could express things so well with just one look. It would have solved a lot of the problems he was having at the moment.

And, just as Mike had feared, Holly was staying for the evening – and hogging everyone; Will most of all, of course. Poker; she was on his side whispering the value of the others' cards into his ear. Darts; she was there, throwing in the general direction of the board and jumping joyfully every time she hit anything – whether that was the outer ring or Mike's hand after he'd made the mistake of wandering too close. No one except for him seemed to find that alarming; rather, everyone just smiled at and encouraged her, which she took to

eagerly. Mike wondered whether his friends were aware what kind of menace they were creating here.

The clock showed eleven o'clock when finally Holly's yawns were starting to become more and more frequent. Will, of course, noticed first and walked over, gently prompting her to get some sleep. Again; had Mike tried that it would have devolved into a staring contest immediately, likely followed by a shouting match. With Will; he knelt down to her eye level and talked to her, and she just smiled brightly. At the end, he gave her a goodnight-hug. Holly practically floated back up the stairs.

And Mike? He was contemplating why it was that he always had to fall in love with such bloody perfect people. Maybe the universe had it out for him. It really wasn't fair.

Without audible communication, the Party divided around the basement after a while. Mike ended up on the far side of the couch, hunched over the map together with Lucas. Since Lucas had already looked into some things in preparation for their work-and-travel tour, they were actually able to make some good progress without the more crazy input from their friends.

Dustin and Will meanwhile were on what had to be their fourth game of chess, using one of Mike's old boards; the one with the plastic figures. Mike glanced over every now and then. He hadn't even known they still had that board, but then these sleepovers had a tendency for turning up things he hadn't thought of in years. So far, Will had won thrice and looked like he was now on his way to the forth.

Dustin was staring at his figures like they had just murdered his mother. "I feel like I have less figures on the board than you. How do you keep beating me?!"

"Fewer figures." El corrected helpfully.

"Whatever. Admit it; you are using secret mind powers to cheat me off my game here."

"This is chess, Dustin." Mike threw in before Will could reply. "No one

needs mind powers to beat you at it."

"Ouch!" Lucas winced.

Dustin glared at all of them accusingly. "Fine; conspire against me why don't you? Will; your defence?"

Will shrugged. "No powers involved. Me and El have played a few times. I guess I just think of what I would do with your figures, and then I try playing counters to that."

"Ah." Dustin looked unconvinced, but picked up his bishop and struck one of Will's pawns. "I'll give that a shot."

Six moves later, his king was checkmate.

"What the hell!"

"Keep it going." Max commented idly from the side-lines. She and El had started braiding each other's hair, which was a lot easier for her than for Max since El still refused to grow hers past her earlobes. "They say chess calms the nerves."

"They' have never met Dustin." Lucas grinned.

El laughed loudly.

Dustin growled. He snatched up the board and started re-arranging the figures into their starting positions. "Okay, smugness, get over here! Will, excuse me, but I have to teach this guy some respect."

"Oh, I'd like to see that." Lucas shot back.

With a smile, Will retreated from the board and swapped places with him, sitting down next to Mike. He leaned over his shoulder to see what he was doing. "Found anything interesting?"

"This is all interesting." Mike replied, proud of how steady his voice sounded. Will had moved extremely close; which really was a shame since it had been a lot easier to breathe a few moments ago.

He felt more than saw Will's brows scrunch up. His head shifted;

curious green eyes burning into Mike as he asked "No Florida?"

"No. Not en route." Mike replied. He had to grin when his friend pouted at that statement. "Why?"

Will crossed his arms, channelling the petulant child look. "You haven't even thought of Disneyland. I feel betrayed. You know Dustin and I always wanted to hitch the Star Wars ride!"

"You all agreed to my pre-planned route! Florida is just a little bit out of the way, don't you think?"

"Nothing is 'out of the way' when it comes to a galaxy far, far away, Mike."

"Normally I'd agree with you, but the closest we'd get on our route it would be, like, thirteen hours of extra driving."

"And you're not prepared to make that little sacrifice for your best friend?"

"I'm prepared to let my best friend take the wheel and watch him fall asleep when he realizes just how long that actually is."

"Rude!"

"Deserved!"

"You're not a gentleman, Mike."

"I'm a realist, which is something you need much more by the look of things, Will."

"Who says I need your pessimistic self at all?"

"You, by still sitting next to me and arguing about it." Mike stated simply.

Will made a valiant effort to keep his frown in place, but it quickly started to morph into a smile. He gave Mike a nudge, and the contact sent electric shivers through his spine. "Idiot." Will complained fondly. With an agile twist, he positioned himself at the far end of the

couch, demonstratively resting his feet across his friend's map. His toes started drumming a slow rhythm against Mike's leg.

It's fine. Just normal teasing between friends; that's all. Stop staring, Mike!

"Well." he coughed, and quickly returned his attention to the not-feet-covered part of the map. The subtle smile hadn't left Will's face, and Mike was determined to keep it there. "I mean. I could try and plot a route that takes us a little further south. Maybe if we strike Vegas..."

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Max watching them. There was a tilt to her mouth that he could only describe as knowing. Mike chose to ignore it. That wasn't that difficult, as a second later Will was back at his shoulder, immediately claiming all his attention. "You had seriously planned Vegas?!"

Mike played it down. "Just thought about it. It's not a matter of the heart or anything."

Will rubbed his neck. "Mike; you know I was just joking with Disneyland. You really don't have to..."

"But I want to." Mike deadpanned. He knew Will well enough. "I don't think anyone will complain about getting a Star Wars ride. You obviously won't. And that's enough reason for me."

And, well, if Will's blush wasn't the best thing in the world at that moment.

"I'm really lucky." Will said suddenly.

"Why?"

Green eyes found Mike's. "To be your friend. You never tell me I'm crazy. You always support me."

Well, fuck; Mike's turn to blush. "You- you do the same, Will. Honestly, I'm the lucky one ..."

"Don't change the topic!" Will hit him playfully. "I'm trying to compliment you; just take it, okay?"

"Okay!" Mike chuckled. "But I'll still say that you deserve everything. I'd do anything for you, and you know that."

For normal teenagers, this would have been just a phrase, uttered in passing. Luckily, they weren't normal, and while Mike may not have planned for it to come out so directly, he meant every word of it. He knew Will would, too, even without him saying it.

Of course, Will said it anyway.

They were really close. Mike hands didn't know what to do with themselves, so they settled on moving to his friend's shoulders and drawing him in for a big hug. Will hugged back fiercely, and Mike rested his head on his shoulder in contentment. They were the perfect height for that, he found. He was certain the neighbours would be able to hear his heart beating in his chest, but Will didn't seem to notice.

Gradually, the evening petered out as the yawns started to get more frequent. Nobody had planned it, but in retrospect it was probably inevitable that a Star Wars marathon was how it ended. "We are the biggest nerds ever." Dustin commented tiredly as the booming opening notes of the theme filled the basement, and got whispers of agreement from all sides. They were all bunched up together, legs falling over arms falling over chests, and whispering as much to each other as they were watching the film. The couch underneath them creaked dangerously. If anything could make the old thing finally give in, this was probably it, Mike thought idly.

Over on the far side of the couch, El had started levitating her fork and knife and now committed them to a fight of life and death. As Mike watched, the knife impaled the fork, which, unimpressed by its own death, continued to launch both of them into the table; pinning its opponent down. Will, sitting next to El, gave a muffled noise; trying to roll his eyes and laugh at the same time, and ending up with an adorably lopsided expression halfway in between. He was blissfully unaware of how Mike's heart clenched at the sight.

And how long are you going to keep calling this a crush? asked his head-voice, now sounding suspiciously like Max.

And how could he have known? It wasn't like he had just spontaneously *decided* to fall in love with Will Byers.

They had been by each other's sides since kindergarten. Always as friends. Best friends. And sure; he was the first person Mike looked for every day at school; the first he always wanted to call when he felt down; who could make him smile just by existing...

He was such an idiot.

With a groan, Mike let his head fall back against the couch. If a Sarlacc pit had somehow opened in the basement floor in this moment, he would have gladly jumped in and put an end to his stupidity.

An hour later, Dustin was the first to excuse himself. He marched over to his sleeping bag and started to snore within moments. A couple of minutes into *Empire Strikes Back*, Max followed; accompanied by Lucas (of course). Mike rolled his eyes silently. The couple didn't have a double mattress, but they had gone for the next best thing and pushed their two singles together so they could snuggle up. Mike heard them whisper and chuckle in the darkness behind him – but thankfully no more gross noises than that.

It ended with Mike, El and Will on the sofa, with Will in the middle and the others' heads on his shoulders. Their eyes struggled to stay open to see Luke arrive on Dagobah. It was perfect.

At some point, Mike raised his head to look at the two of them.

El was looking more at peace than she had in a long time, what with all the high school stress; and this peace looked extremely good on her. It suited her. Mike smiled as he thought of how well it had all worked out. El would study. She would have a normal life – or as normal as it could get, with friends like them. She had always wanted that.

Will was looking at the TV screen; eyes soft and dark; absently running his hand through Mike's hair. Mike's heart was beating against his ribs, but it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to just feel.

The next thing he felt was a soft kiss being pressed to his cheek. He blinked awake again. El hovered next to him, her eyes positively shining. "Thanks." she whispered.

"What for?" Mike asked sleepily.

"This."

With a final squeeze of Mike's hand, she slid around the couch; bare toes never making a sound.

This. *This* encompassed so much, and Mike could only lay still and let it sink in. Part of him wanted to rush over and give El a great big hug. He'd do that tomorrow. And the day after that too, probably. She deserved it, and so much more. "Never wastes a word." he said quietly.

"You love it." Will chuckled.

"Yeah."

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I think my shoulder has fallen asleep."

"Want me to move?"

"Don't you dare."

Mike tilted his head up. In the TV lights, Will's eyes were doing their colour-changing thing again. They were already heavy with sleep. His lips were slightly parted, with a small smile revealing a dimple in the corner of his mouth (Han Solo was currently on screen, and he always cracked Will up).

It was a soft look, and one that was so cute and quintessentially *Will* that Mike thought his chest might explode.

"I'll miss you so much." He whispered the words into the air, so only Will could catch them.

Will's eyes flicked down to where Mike was resting against him. His sleepy smile morphed into something else; something gentle. Something seemed to glow inside him. "We're not gone yet, Mike." he whispered back.

"No." Mike's hand found Will's on the couch, linking them together.

"Why don't you come outside, Princess?"

"Don't do it, Leia." Mike mumbled. "There's mynocks."

Will giggled sleepily.

The princess on screen didn't listen to his advice, but Mike didn't really watch her leaving the ship. Something in the atmosphere had shifted; it felt – new; strange, but in a good way. For once, Mike didn't think about it too much. With Will's warmth next to him, he was perfectly content closing his eyes and just breathing, holding on to the moment. He could stay like this forever.

A finger drummed lightly on his chest, prompting him to look up. His friend's smile held something nostalgic, happy, and a little bit scared.

"Don't you forget about me, yeah?"

Mike laughed softly. "Good one. As if I could ever do that."

"You sure?"

"Completely. You won't forget me, right?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"There you have it."

Will's eyes were a dark mirror. "Why does this feel like goodbye already?"

"It doesn't!" Mike protested. He didn't know what this felt like, but it definitely wasn't goodbye. "You're crazy-talking, Will."

Will laughed. His lips twitched, and Mike knew what was coming

even before Will said it.

"Together."

Mike wanted to hug him; hold him; kiss him; all at once.

He propped himself up on his elbows. Will made a noise of protest as his head left his shoulder and leaned forward. Their foreheads almost brushed. Their eyes found each other, and Mike found he was lost for words. All gone; all fled from this world that suddenly seemed to have nothing but Will in it.

Will hesitantly shook out his asleep arm and grimaced: "Tingles."

"Sorry." Mike breathed.

One moment there was barely any space left in between them, and the next there suddenly was none. Mike felt soft lips against his, and he couldn't remember to have leaned in, but he must have done because he was kissing Will. And he really didn't want to stop. And Will was kissing him back.

He tasted of mint and chips and coke, and not at all how Mike had imagined, and why was he even thinking about this? All coherent thought in his head shut off and he closed his eyes; leaning in and further and deepening the kiss. There was nothing else in the world. Will made a small noise in his throat, and it hummed pleasantly all the way down through Mike's chest. He reached up to cup Will's cheek in his palm. His fingers went on a journey; tracing along the lines of his friend's face, as if discovering it for the first time.

There was a sharp gasp, and suddenly Mike was only holding empty air. He opened his eyes again, his mind completely jumbled. He felt lightheaded, giddy. It vanished in an instant when he saw Will. He had scrambled all the way to the other side of the couch; as far away from Mike as possible. He was staring at him, his eyes wide and afraid.

Mike gulped heavily. "Will?"

Will shook his head frantically. The smallest whisper left his mouth: "*What was that?*" Mike barely heard it.

Then Will's eyes snapped up to meet his. His expression was full of confusion and hurt. "*What was that?!*" he demanded again, this time far too loudly.

"I- "Mike stammered. His hands fell to his sides as deadweight. "Sorry; I didn't mean..."

"The cave is collapsing!

This isn't a cave!"

Probably for the first time in history, the reckless flight of the Millennium Falcon on screen went completely ignored.

"You kissed me!"

Will looked shaken. His teeth worried at his lower lip, bruising it to the point of drawing blood. And still, all Mike wanted to do was lean back in and kiss those lips. For a second there, he had thought Will wanted it, too. Now he very clearly didn't want to, and Mike's heart was breaking slowly. Why had he done that; what had gotten into him? He gestured helplessly: "I thought you wanted to..."

A shrill laugh; so unhinged that Mike could barely believe it came from Will. "Wanted to? *Wanted to?!*"

"I'm so sorry! I couldn't stop thinking about you, and you said – and you were... And I just wanted to kiss you." Mike finished lamely. His heart still wanted to, even while his brain was screaming 'He doesn't feel the same way!' He had just ruined everything. He struggled to meet his friend's eyes again, pleading, trying to fix this somehow. "Will; I'm sorry. I know it's wrong to feel like this, but I just couldn't ignore it anymore."

Will's eyes went wide. "What?! What are you...?"

"I think I l-love you..."

"You...you...what?!"

"I know you don't think of me like that, and I'm sorry, but I lov-..."

Suddenly, Will was on him. With an inhuman noise, he was punching Mike's arms, his shoulders; whatever he could reach. Mike was so taken off guard that he didn't even attempt to defend himself. Will's face was twisted in helpless anger. "Stop it! You don't say that! Not now; after all this time...YOU CAN'T SAY THAT TO ME!"

PANG!

The TV exploded. With a deafening noise, the room lit up as if one of the light sabres had burst through the screen. It left Mike half-blind. Bits of burning plastic scorched his arms and hit the couch behind him. He felt a sharp pain on his cheek and yelled, covering his head.

"Wha-!" Dustin shot up from his sleeping bag, completely sleep-confused. His eyes turned their way and nearly bulged out of his head. "What the...!"

Everyone else was on their feet within seconds. Lucas was the first to grasp the situation and yelled "Fire!" He snatched up two soda cans from the table and started dousing the sofa, where flames were licking up to Mike's legs. Max, meanwhile, had gotten a hold of the fire extinguisher and sprayed the burning wreck of the TV. For a few chaotic seconds, there was just steam and confusion and yelling.

Mike's ears were ringing. His cheek felt like it had been doused in fire; he had no idea what had just happened – and he was alone on the couch. When he looked up, he could just see Will's legs vanishing up the stairs. Then he was gone.

"Okay!" Dustin finally made himself heard over the mayhem. "It's under control! Calm down! Everything is fine!"

"Not the word, I'd use, man." Lucas shot back. He stared at the smoking TV. "What the fuck?!"

"Is everyone okay?" El asked.

"Mike! You're bleeding!" Suddenly Max was in front of him, looking him over with shock on her face. "Holy shit!"

Mike was still staring at the stairs. Will was gone.

"Okay, hold still; this might hurt." he heard, and then Max' hand reached for him and his cheek exploded in pain. He cried out. At least the pain broke through his daze and turned his brain back on again. It all came crashing back over him and he sat up sharply. "Will!"

"Keep calm, Wheeler; you shouldn't make any sudden movements." Max advised. She held up her hand and Mike saw that she was holding a glass shard the size of her thumb. The edge was tipped bloody. "That thing was in your face a second ago. You can count yourself lucky you still have depth-perception."

Mike stared at it, uncomprehending.

Then Lucas asked "Where is Will?" as if he'd just now noticed.

For heads looked around the basement.

Dustin and Lucas exchanged a glance, immediately filled with the kind of fear they hadn't had to deal with in years. Both thinking the same thing. "I'll go check on him!" Dustin said. He headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"Mike." El asked gently. She was looking at him, like she was seeing what was going on better than the others. "What happened?"

"He – he left." Mike stammered.

"*Outside?!*" Max cried, aghast. "There's a fucking snow storm on; what..." she broke off and sprinted after Dustin. Mike heard her throw open the front door. "Will!"

Three pairs of eyes turned to him.

"I-" Mike didn't know. What had he done? How had this gone so wrong so fast? It had felt so *right*, and he'd been so *sure*...

Something must have shown on his face, because Lucas took pity on him. "Maybe he's had a panic attack." he offered. "It's happened before. We have to go after him, and..."

In a shower of snow, Max came racing back down the stairs. Usually

unfazed by anything, now she seemed close to a panic. "I can't find him! You can barely see ten feet!" Her helpless look landed on Mike. "What does he think he's doing?!"

The end. For now...

(Hihi)

6. Brother, Friend, Boyfriend

Here we go again! To anyone who is following this story; I'm sorry for the long wait. Life is messy at the moment. But, on the positive side, this story is shaping up to be the first longer one that I'm actually going to finish! **cue victory fanfare**

Disclaimer: For the second part of this, I recommend reading "*The Light in Our Eyes*" first, as it clears up a few things about Will and El's dynamic. It's not strictly necessary to understand what's going on, but it might prevent a few 'huh?' moments.

As always, let me know what you think. Have a good read!

Brother, Friend, Boyfriend

There were loud voices coming from downstairs; drifting up through the floorboards in that insistent way that only a heavy argument could.

It had woken Holly even in her room. Now, rubbing her eyes of sleep, she was stumbling down the steps, following the noise. The clock on the wall read 1:00 am. Holly ignored it, though she usually was never allowed to be up after ten. She wasn't allowed now, either. But this time it wasn't *her* fault, so her parents couldn't blame her. And she wanted to know what was going on.

And that rule was stupid anyway.

"I'm not going to ask again!" That was her mother's voice. Coming from the basement, strangely enough. She sounded angry, angrier than Holly had heard her in a long time. "How did this happen?!"

"Mom, I told you it just caught fire!" That was Mike. "Listen, we don't have time for this; we have to..."

"Oh, we are making time for this, Michael. TVs don't just catch fire like that!"

Holly crept down the basement steps, brimming with curiosity. The dimly lit room, as she saw once her eyes adjusted, was full of people: both her parents were there, shaking with anger and scratching his head respectively; Mike was arguing with mother, the magic girl, El, by his side; and the rest of his friends stood a little further back, whispering among themselves.

The only one missing was Will. Holly noticed that immediately. She frowned. Maybe he'd gone home early. Then she noticed that the light kept flickering, as if there were a power outage. And *then* her eyes finally landed on the TV – or what was left of it. Holly stared open-mouthed at the smoking shell, then back at Mike and her agitated mother, and braced herself. She had no idea what had happened, but there was definitely going to be more yelling.

To her surprise, however, it wasn't all directed at her brother. Instead, Karen had drawn herself up in front of El and was glowering down at her. Holly liked the older girl – she was funny, scary and cool – but her mother didn't seem to share the sentiment. Her voice had gotten shrill. "Did you have something to do with this?!"

"Now, darling..." her father hesitantly tried to intervene.

"No, Ted, save it. I want an explanation now! You might be oblivious to anything strange going on in this house, but I'm not. It's been happening for a while. And it's always with her in the room!"

El crossed her arms defiantly. Her glower was at least as stern as mother's, and Holly watched from her perch with baited breath. She felt like she was watching a standoff in a movie.

"It was an accident." El said with forced calm.

"An accident." Karen looked like she'd be breathing fire any moment.

"Mom, listen..." Mike tried to interrupt. He had to be getting the same fire-breathing impression from mother. His protest was quiet, though; almost shy. Holly looked to him, confused. The entire time he was being oddly passive, which was very unlike him. Usually when they argued, he wasn't holding back. Which was why Holly liked arguing with him so much and did it all the time.

But now it was different, and mother wasn't listening. "Mike! Have you even looked at yourself?! You're lucky if this doesn't scar!" She reached for his face. Mike jerked his head away, and now Holly could see a long red line running down his cheek. It looked like he'd cut himself somewhere. Karen put her hands on her hips, like she'd proved her point, and turned her glare back on El. "It's not the first time she's done this, either. What about our couch flying through the window – somehow? Your strange bruises, Mike? Will's *burn scars*?! And people talk. There's more of the same; strange things happening all over. And this all started when *she* came here. *You* are just not *normal*."

During the last part, she had pointed her finger right under El's nose, who visibly stiffened. Like it sensed the conflict, the light started to flicker manically. The basement had fallen deadly silent.

"It wasn't my fault." El ground out, finally.

"Whose is it then?!" Karen asked in her 'I don't believe you' voice.

"No. One's. Fault. It happened. We..."

"It happen- are you listening to this?!"

It was one of the questions that Holly had learned didn't really want an answer; her mother's tone made that very clear. She had never sounded so mean. Holly had the urge to go to the older girl and help her somehow, but she couldn't move from her spot. Her mother scared her right now.

"Are you just one of those who enjoy destroying things, is that it? Just today I heard that you slit open a boy's bag in school and threw his things all over the floor!"

"That's not what happened!" came the immediate protest from the others, drowning out Holly's "Cool!".

Karen shook her head resolutely. "Mike, I've put up with this for years because you apparently care for her, but enough is just enough. You are really hurt this time. Just because her father is the chief doesn't mean I can't inform the police about this."

"Mom...!"

"Now, Karen..."

"Mrs. Wheeler, if we could just explain..."

BAM!

Everyone jumped at the sound, heads turning towards the basement door, which had just fallen shut, forcefully. A cold wind swept through the basement. Through the window, Holly just saw El's figure walking out into the snow, then vanishing.

"Where is she going?" she piped up.

Her father looked up, finally spying her on the steps. "Holly. Shouldn't you be in bed this la-..."

"Ah, guys? Now our mage is running into that storm..."

"Oh for fuck's sake; why is everyone going crazy today!" Mad Max cursed.

Karen blinked, the mean look on her face finally melting a little. Maybe she realized she had yelled too much. Now that the object of her shouting was gone, she didn't seem to know what to do. Her arms lifted helplessly: "She, uh, she can't go out there..."

"She has the right idea here!" Mike all but shouted. Whatever had compelled him to be quiet before; it seemed to have worn off, because now he wasn't calm at all. He rushed half-way to the door, then stopped himself and started pacing, instead, addressing his remaining friends. "Grab something warm. Will is out there, and if we don't do something he'll freeze to death. We have to find him!"

"What in the world are you talking about, Mike?"

Holly was suddenly feeling cold, and it had nothing to do with the winter. "Will is...?"

Mike ignored both of them completely. He was turning on the spot, looking at the others in turn. "Guys, come on!"

Holly's eyes flicked to the wall of white behind the windows. She wouldn't leave the house during a storm; her parents always told her not to. And Will was too smart to do that. He wouldn't do that. What had happened?

She wasn't alone in her confusion, because nobody was moving. Mike stared at all of them incredulously for half-a-second, then he cursed and stormed off.

"Michael!"

Holly jumped to her feet as he rushed past her and followed him up the stairs, not paying any attention to her mother's shouts behind them. There was only one thought on her mind: *Will*. Followed by *Mike wants to help him*.

When she caught up to him, he was already wearing a coat and was now rummaging in the hallway wardrobe for a woolly hat. It would still be cold, but Holly knew her brother well enough to know that wasn't going to stop him, unlike mother and the others. Holly walked up to him, trying to make herself taller. Her family always ignored her when important things were going on, but she wasn't going to be ignored now. "You're going to help him?"

Mike looked at her for the first time. His expression was uncertain, but somehow also determined. "It's my fault he ran off. If something happens to him..."

Holly paused for second at the 'my fault', but then decided it could wait. She didn't wait for Mike to finish, but ducked under his arm and reached for her own rainbow coloured winter jacket. "I'm coming, too!"

Her brother blinked, caught off guard. "Uh..."

"No one is going anywhere!" Karen protested, finally having caught up with them. "Holly! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Helping!" Holly stated, putting her hands on her hips the way she'd seen her do.

Friends help each other.

Once, she had asked Will how he could stand to be around her brother every single day. He had smiled and said that they were friends. That was all he said, but it was the way he said it that made her realize how much he cared for Mike. *Friends*. Will was nice; the only boy who she'd never heard say anything bad about anyone. The way he had put it, it made it sound like Mike was the best person in Hawkins, and he had almost convinced Holly, too – until a few minutes later, when her brother came home and she was reminded why he annoyed her so much.

But though Mike was stupid most of the time, he did care for Will, too. Holly knew that. And right now he was pushing past mother to go and help him, and that made him the only one doing something. Resolutely, she closed up her jacket and followed him.

Both their parents protested – equally vehemently, for once – but to Holly's surprise it was Lucas who caught Mike by the arm and stopped him, causing her to bump into them. "Don't. Mike, there's no way we'd find them in that mess."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but he's right." Dustin joined him from his spot by the basement door, trying to squeeze into the crowded hallway. "Look at that out there. We'd just get lost as well."

Mike wasn't really listening. Holly could practically hear his mind whirring. "Will's upset. When he's upset, he goes to El, his mother, or..." He cut himself off suddenly and swallowed. "Anyway, he's either going home or to Castle Byers. And I'm sure El has followed him. If we check there..."

"We'd never get there!" Lucas protested, more heatedly. "Have you seen this storm? We'd freeze before we left the town."

"That's why we have to go!" Holly piped up. She couldn't understand why they were even arguing about this. "You can't let him freeze!"

The others exchanged a glance. Dustin stopped chewing on his lip and knelt down to her eye level, trying to look confident. "Look, Holly, they're going to be fine. El has magic, remember? And Will – he's been in worse situations. Wherever they're going, they'll make it out just fine."

"How can you say that?!" Mike demanded. "What if something happens again? They're out there, alone. Why aren't you worried?"

The other boy apparently forgot that he was trying to calm Holly and jumped back up to face Mike. "Of course I'm worried! I don't like it any more than you! But panicking isn't going to help anybody. There'd only be six of us lost in that storm instead of two. The best we can do is stay calm and..."

"I vote we go." Mad Max, who had been silent so far, interrupted. "Mike's right, we have to do something."

"Why is no one listening?! Whatever possessed Will to run out there, it's not going to help him if..."

"What even happened...?"

"There has to be a better way..."

"We don't have time for this...!"

"People, we all seriously have to calm down..."

It went back and forth, a chaos of arguments that her parents now joined as well, and Holly couldn't stand it anymore. She backed away. No one was looking at her. While they were all still arguing, she moved to the door, cracked it open and slipped outside.

Immediately, the cold wind hit her and made her stumble. She had to grab the post box not to lose her footing. With an effort, Holly caught herself and pushed forward. It was colder than she'd thought. The snow made everything blurry in her sight, and she couldn't help the shiver of fear that came with not being able to see what was out there. She kept walking anyway. The snow was piled up to her ankles when she finally reached the street, and her toes were starting to numb. She shivered and looked over her shoulder.

The door was still closed. No one had even noticed she was gone.

Holly resisted the urge to run back into the warmth and give in, and turned to face the cold wind again. *Somebody has to help!* she thought defiantly. Friends helped each other. Will said that, even Mike said

that. Holly drew her coat tighter around herself. Will was the best person she had ever met. He'd always helped her, with anything. Now she was going to help him.

The storm lifted for a brief second. Between the trees, a familiar shape emerged from the white chaos.

Will's breath came out in small, white clouds, immediately torn away by the wind. He had stopped feeling the cold, nor did he know how long he'd been out here in the storm. He was past caring, too. But now the sight of the small little hut his brother and him and built so long ago promised shelter, like it always had, and safety.

Will trudged towards it. After fighting his way all this way through the fresh snow, his feet had gone numb with cold. The lines of tears running down his cheeks had frozen stiff; he had stopped trying to wipe them off. He didn't attempt to do so now either as he ducked underneath the linen entry flap that had somehow stayed in place in all the wind, and crouched into his old hiding place. *Safety*. He needed that now. Desperately.

I'll miss you so much...

I thought you wanted to...

Together...

I think I love you...

Will collapsed onto the pile of ancient, moth-eaten sheets. His hand searched for something, anything steady to hold on to, found what felt like an old book cover and clutched it like his life depended on it. It might as well have. His head was a sea of panicked thoughts, confusion and Mike's voice saying the same things over and over, and Will felt like he was drowning. He was dimly aware that outside the storm kept raging with undiminished force; making the old beams creak and groan in protest like they wanted to collapse at any moment. His mind registered that. It just wasn't nearly loud enough to drown out all the rest.

He shivered and huddled deeper into his sweater. The cloth was bone-dry – not a single snow flake had landed on it the entire way here. Will hadn't consciously focused on it, but apparently his being agitated and lost like he felt now equalled that not even the elements wanted to come near him. All that snow and wind, and it hadn't even come close to touching him all the way to Castle Byers.

Will looked around himself, at the old blankets, pencils and sheets of paper; all covered in dust. He hadn't been here in a long time. He hadn't thought he'd ever come to this place simply because he wanted to hide again, either. Those times should have been behind him.

But no, the defiant side of his mind protested; he wasn't hiding. Hiding implied you were afraid of something. And he wasn't afraid. He was angry. Perhaps. Anger was the closest thing Will had to compare it to, anyway. Only this was much more intense and much more painful than anything he had ever felt before.

And maybe *that* in turn did make him a little bit afraid. Afraid of – well; of what he might do. When he got emotional, bad things happened. He thought he dimly remembered an explosion, back there, that might have been his fault or not; it was all a blur. But in his current mental state, he didn't trust himself – and that stupid Upside Down thing still inside him – not to do something. Shielding himself against the snow was one thing. If he saw Mike again...

Mike.

Just the thought made Will want to scream, or cry, or punch something. He settled for a shock of bitter laughter, bubbling up from his chest without any rhyme or reason. There really was nothing even remotely funny about this situation. Somehow, years of time spent with his best friend had just crumbled into fragments, with no more but a few words, and Will had been completely blindsided. Why had this happened; how had this perfect evening gone so wrong so fast?

The fading of the storm and the sudden quiet around the castle gave him a second's warning of what was coming in advance. Then the entry sheet was pulled aside, and the shadow stood in the opening, dark against the snow. Looking at him.

Will stared back. For a couple of seconds, neither of them moved. Then the shadow ducked inside, the sheet unceremoniously tucking itself back into place behind her without any visible contact. El shook out her arms and caught his eyes, her face framed by partly braided hair. "Hey."

Maybe Will should have been more surprised that she'd managed to follow him in that storm. But right now he was too drained even for surprise. And maybe a small part of him had even been expecting it. "Hey." he replied miserably.

El sat down opposite him. Her expression was concerned and wary. Not angry, though. Will was glad for that much, even as her eyes did their familiar x-raying thing, flicking across his face and down to his hands shaking in his lap. She probably didn't need to be a telepath to know how he was feeling. El understood him far too well, and for the first time in a long while, Will didn't know if he wanted her to.

"You vanished. Everyone is worried about you."

He sighed. "Sorry."

Her eyes flickered. "Upside Down?"

"No."

"Nightmare?"

"No."

Her fist connected with his shoulder, forcefully, leaving his entire upper arm numb. "Will you stop it with the one-word answers? That's my thing."

A not-bitter, mildly amused laugh forced its way out of Will's mouth before he could stop it. He frowned at his sister accusingly. "That wasn't even funny." He rubbed his arm. "And that hurt."

"Whatever. Wanna talk about it?"

Will's heart sank again. Did he want to talk about it? Not really. And what was *it*? What exactly had happened back there? His thoughts

had circled around little else the entire time, and he still wasn't any closer to understanding it.

El sighed at his lack of response. She nudged his legs with a foot for him to scoot, then sat down on the blanket next to him. That required her folding herself up quite considerably, lest her legs stuck out: the space in here was a lot more cramped than Will remembered, and it dawned on him that El had never actually been in here with him before. Well, at least she hadn't been physically here...

The memory made him shiver involuntarily. He grabbed another blanket and draped it around them, like a cocoon. It didn't do much to stave off the cold. "Did Mike say anything?" he asked carefully.

"He's sorry, and he never wanted to hurt you." El said, toying with the edge of the blanket. "But you know that already. You'd never hurt each other. So basically he's just sorry."

There was an unspoken question in there. Will tip-toed around it. "Did – did I hurt anyone?"

"Mike's a bit roughed up. Caught a piece of the TV. Nothing serious, though." she added quickly when Will's head snapped up. "He wasn't paying it any mind when I left. He's more worried about you."

Will breathed out deeply, hating the feeling of relief that flooded through his veins. He was angry at Mike, dammit! That didn't work if he felt guilty at the same time. He had nothing to blame himself for. Mike had...

What had he done, back there?

"He – he kissed me."

He hadn't meant to say that out loud, but the misty clouds flying from his lips proved otherwise, and now it hung in the air between them.

"Oh."

Will looked up. Part of him expected El to recoil, or at least look surprised. She was, too, but not nearly enough. She was just looking

at him, chewing on her bottom lip. Then she nodded; like something had just fallen into place for her. Like she understood what was happening. And in some way, that was worse.

"Why would he do that?!" Will demanded, his chest constricting with new anger. All the frustration that had built up inside him since he'd stormed out of the Wheelers' house was choking him, and he couldn't just swallow it back down this time. Neither did he want to. "It all was so good and nice and then he – why? He didn't- he shouldn't..." His voice trailed off.

El still didn't respond. Slowly, with the most careful of movements, she leaned forward and wiped something from his cheek. Will hadn't even realized he was crying again.

Before the thought of stopping the tears could even form fully, he was suddenly wrapped up in an intense, warm hug that for one moment pushed back everything else. Everything but the feeling of El hugging him. She was impossibly warm for this weather; or perhaps he was just so cold. His body slumped in that warmth and he gave up, giving in to the tears.

El's arms tightened around him. She murmured something that Will couldn't make out. Beneath his sobs, though, he recognized the feeling that came with it. In a horrible and comforting way, this was familiar. It brought back memories of jolting awake late at night, drenched in sweat, to find a hand holding his in the darkness. It had been years since then, but the feeling now was the same.

They'd get through this. *He* would get through this.

One hug, and Will remembered that, bright as day. The sobs died in his throat, leaving him hoarse and aching, but warm. El didn't make any move to pull away, and her quiet presence grounded him. Will swallowed thickly. What had possessed him to run all the way out here? His previous – desperation, almost – suddenly seemed stupidly silly. Will moved one hand away from El's back to clutch at his brow, trying to get a grip on his earlier thought process. How had he thought this was an okay thing to do?

He was an idiot.

"You know," a voice said by his ear, "I did tell you so."

"What?" Will mumbled, confused.

El pulled away. Her sweater was tear-stained, but she didn't pay that any mind. She gave a hesitant smile. "Mike. I told you he wanted to kiss you."

"He doesn't...!" Will started and stopped half-way when he realized he was trying to deny what had literally happened. Habit. Mike *had* in fact kissed him. No dream, and not Will had started it. But perhaps it had been an accident; maybe Mike had been falling asleep and hadn't known what he was doing – even in Will's head that excuse sounded flimsy. That's not what it had felt like. Not in the slightest.

The truth was; he couldn't honestly deny it. His best friend had definitely kissed him in a definitely-not-best-friend way. And that was terrifying.

El had raised an eyebrow in that way he'd come to understand as 'I'm going to assume you already know how stupid what you just said was'. Will sighed, his shoulders slumping. "Yeah. I suppose."

"I thought you'd look happier about it. He means so much to you."

"Hmph."

"Instead you run away out here, because why? Panicked? Too scared of the happiness?"

Will snorted under his breath, casting her a wry look. Now she was just deliberately trying to rile him up to get him out of his dejected state. She could be so obvious sometimes. Too late he realized that it had kind of worked. He nudged her accusingly. "Hey!"

El nudged right back, muttering a small "Gotcha!" before falling back into silence. When she spoke again, her voice was a lot softer. "*Aren't* you happy about it?"

"No!" Will shook his head fervently. His shoulders slumped. "Yes. I don't know."

"Now you even sound like Mike."

"No I don't! And it's complicated, okay?" Frustrated, Will buried his face in his hands. He did owe her an explanation. Just, how could he even begin to explain this? Where, *when* would he even begin? The Snow Ball? The Upside Down? The swings? All valid points to start from, and yet none of them felt like they encompassed everything that this was about. And that was how it felt like to *him*. Even if he managed to start somewhere; how could he expect anyone else to be able to understand this mess that was his state of mind? And his feelings for Mike?

El was still looking at him. Her eyes were gentle.

"I love him."

Coming out like that, the three words sounded so simple. There was no big bang, nor a sudden monster jumping into the room to swallow him whole. Just the three words, rising up as small clouds in the freezing air. It was easy. So much so that for a moment Will thought it had just happened in his head. He looked at his sister.

"I know."

Somehow, her simple answer didn't surprise him. Of course she would know. It didn't make Will panic like he'd imagined he would if anyone ever found out, either. He felt eerily calm. "Was it that obvious?" he asked with a sigh.

El shook her head. "No, but – I see it now. I think I understand. Friend. Best friend. Boyfriend..." Her look was thoughtful, her mouth forming the words as if trying them out for size. Then a smile spread over her face and she nudged him. "Of course it's Mike. He's always with you. He's..."

"Oblivious." Will finished, more harshly than intended.

El smiled lightly, though Will assumed she had wanted to say something different. "Confused." she agreed.

"So bloody confused. He doesn't know when to quit. Never met a situation he didn't want to make the best out of, and usually does.

"Why does he have to be so bloody good?" Will continued to rant.

"Yep."

"And oblivious." Will amended quickly, realizing that had almost been a compliment.

"Always knows what to do, though. Plans everything through." El stated.

"Overplans everything."

"But in a cute way. His D&D scenarios get stranger every time..."

Will snorted. "Tell me about it. Not to mention that weird take on Shakespeare he did last week."

"Or the way he's panicking when he thinks we don't like his campaign."

"Or that thing he does with his fingers when he's nervous."

"See?" El asked innocently.

Will frowned, pausing reluctantly. "What?"

"He's so easy to love."

Far too late, Will realized where she had steered him. He searched for a negating reply to that, found he couldn't find one and just grunted in response. After what Mike had done this evening, he refused to admit that El's assessment hit the bullseye. Will hadn't meant any of what he'd listed about Mike as a compliment, after all. At least, she wouldn't hear him admit that out loud.

Yes, it was petty, but considering the turmoil he was going through, Will thought he had earned the right to be a little petty.

After a few moments' silence, El asked "How long? Have you loved him, I mean."

It was still kind of unsettling hearing her say that so openly, matter-

of-factly, like there'd never been any doubt about it. Will took a deep, calming breath. Now that it was out, what was there left to lose? He shrugged. "Forever, probably?" Again he was surprised at how steady his voice sounded. He thought for a moment. "Fourth grade definitely."

"You never said anything."

"Of course I didn't! What could I have said? 'Hey, I know we're friends, and have been since forever, but now I like you as more than that. I love you and I want you for myself and I don't care who thinks that's wrong!' I –" Will cut himself off, embarrassed. How often he had wished for the courage to say exactly that, but had always stopped before any of it could leave his lips. He was a great big coward.

El chewed on her bottom lip. Something occurred to her: "So, when Mike and I were dating..."

Will swallowed thickly. "Yeah. Then, too." he confessed. The warmth inside him dimmed abruptly. Forget anger or even comfort; guilt was now definitely his dominant feeling. He glanced at the girl next to him, ashamed. El had become in every way like a sister to him – a fact that had made what followed after 1984's Snow Ball impossibly hard to bear.

Mike and her had been blatantly in love when Will had seen them again after all the chaos had settled; a blind man could have seen that. It wasn't just the spontaneous crush kind, either: they were so obviously perfect with each other, and Will was probably the only person who hadn't been happy for them. Wished it were different, even; that they'd disagree or fight or do anything other than being a perfect couple. Yes, of course he'd been jealous. And jealousy had made him think some very nasty things then.

Just thinking about that now made him ashamed. Will swallowed, his eyes falling to the floor. The words were like lead on his tongue, but he forced them out anyway. "I didn't w-want you to be together. When he kissed you or – looked at you like that, that-" Will thought he'd buried the hurt that accompanied those memories along with his stupid feelings, but now it was back, red and raw like it had been

then. "I'm sorry." he managed.

Silence. El wasn't answering, wasn't even moving. For her, who usually got antsy when having to sit still for more than a minute, that was alarming. That meant she had to really refrain from doing anything. Will shivered; forced himself to meet her eyes, suddenly afraid of what he would see.

Do you hate me? She would have every right to. Still he didn't think he could bear that.

What he saw was El rolling her eyes at him:

Of course I don't, you idiot.

For a heartbeat, all Will could think was that their usually flawless non-verbal understanding had been screwed up somehow. But then El's lips twitched, lifted at the corners. She made a noise somewhere between a grunt and a laugh. "Will. I love you. But sometimes you think such stupid things!" For emphasis, she let another punch follow her words. And *that* left no doubt that she meant every word.

Will heard himself giggle shakily. He didn't even try to hide his relief. He rubbed the tender spot, wincing. "That felt good." he admitted. "So you – really don't have a problem with it?"

"Only if you keep looking so panicked." El's smile disappeared slowly. Will would never describe her as 'pensive', but right then she almost looked that way. Her far-away eyes told him she was lost in a memory, too. Then she blinked and admitted "I know about jealousy, trust me. I won't snap your neck."

"That's a relief."

She cringed. "Every time we kissed in front of you... I'm sorry. Why did you never say anything?"

Will gaped at her, startled. "You...really? Why did I never say anything?!"

El frowned in confusion. "What?"

He shook his head. "El, I love you, but you can be so stupid sometimes." he echoed her.

"What?! How am I stupid? *You* are the one who never told anyone!"

"What if I had?! El, really, think about that for a second. How would that have worked? Would you have broken up with Mike, or he with you?" He didn't wait for a response. "Of course not! Because you two are just so perfect and nice and great and you fit so well together and you were snuggling all the time...how could I fit into that?"

El faltered. It was probably the first time since she'd stormed in that he'd seen her really uncertain. "I – we could have figured something out..."

Will sighed, lowering his arms from where he'd raised them in his tirade. He felt drained. "You know what; yeah, you probably would have. As I said; Mike's too bloody nice. He would have felt compelled to include me, even if he didn't feel the same way. Being the third wheel in there? No thanks."

"Third wheel?"

"Useless. Unwanted. Obsolete."

"You're not useless!" El disagreed vehemently. The squaring of her jaw told him she was now on her stubborn streak. "After we weren't together anymore, that wasn't a problem anymore, right?! Why not then?"

"Well, I obviously thought Mike didn't care about me like that, after all that time!"

"Mike cares about you. He'd go to hell for you if he had to."

"I know he would! And I for him! But it was always friends, El. For him, at least. If I had kissed him and he didn't feel the same way – how could we have been friends after that?"

"How not?"

She wasn't getting it. "El, it- it's not that simple. You can't just go back

to normal after that. And, look, even if he'd liked me back; what if he'd get tired of me? Or find someone else who's much better for him? I'm just Will, and..." His voice faded away. He'd never admitted these insecurities to anyone. He managed a shrug. "I just didn't want to risk what we had."

"So – you didn't want to be in love with him because at some point you might not be anymore?"

Will frowned. "You make it sound stupid when you say it like that."

El crossed her arms. "It is stupid."

Will didn't have the energy to argue. "It's not like I didn't hope he'd say something, at some point," he admitted. "But he never did, and I resigned myself to that. Until..." Will stopped, the memory still setting off goose bumps on his skin. "Until he suddenly kissed me, back there."

"And that's why you ran away." El concluded. It wasn't a question.

"Thirteen years. He never did anything to suggest he – he likes me. And then he just kisses me! How am I supposed to be prepared for that?!"

"Yeah, I don't think Mike thought about it like that." El mused. She chuckled lightly: "You were right; he can be very oblivious to some things. Now he thinks he's scared you off because you don't like him back."

Will groaned and hugged his knees. "This is a mess."

"But now it's cleared up, isn't it? When Mike kisses you, it's pretty obvious he likes you." She x-rayed him again, and her confident smile slipped slowly when she took in his lack of enthusiasm. "So why do you see it as a bad thing?" she asked softly.

"El, you don't get it. I was over it." He started rocking back and forth, his head banging against the logs. "I was ready to go off and start something new, and then he just – why? Why now? He really said he *loves* me." The implications of that were only now starting to sink in, and all of a sudden there were butterflies dancing in Will's stomach.

Mike loved him! That was much too much to take in. His thoughts were tripping over themselves: "I- he said- *how?* I mean, how did that happen?"

An arm sneaked around his shoulders, pulling him closer to the girl next to him. The grounding effect of that still worked, though not nearly as well as before against this new wave of confusion.

"Why does Mike do anything? You think he knows it himself?" Will was relieved to hear that El's voice held confusion as well. A small little hint that the entire situation had caught her just as off guard as him. If she had continued having answers to everything, Will might have snapped. The realization that *Mike loved him* had left him pretty shaken.

"What if this is just a momentary thing?" he blurted out. "If it's just that we are all going our own ways in a few months and Mike doesn't want me to go and that makes him think it's more than it is? And when that wears off, what if he- mmph."

"Will, shut up." El demanded. Kind of unnecessarily, since she was already covering his mouth with her hand. When he didn't immediately protest, she lifted it and let it fall to his shoulder instead, claspng it firmly. Her eyes boring into him shone with conviction. "I think I get it. You don't want to lose him. Now listen: if he didn't let you go when you were dead, he is *not* going to let you go if it for some reason doesn't work out between you two. That's not Mike." She inclined her head meaningfully. "I speak from experience there, remember? And kissing him is nice. You'll like it."

Will blinked at her, trying to turn all that over in his head. A semblance of optimism began to sneak in: Her argument did sort of make sense, didn't it? At least he found himself believing it, against his better judgement. El's confidence turned out to be as contagious as ever. Just... "Why *did* you break up with him?" Will asked the question that was burning him up. He'd wondered about that for a long time, since, as far as he knew, there hadn't been any cause. Neither for Mike nor for her.

El huffed out an annoyed breath, drifting away like smoke. Her arms crossed once again, like they had a mind of their own. "I hate that.

Why does everyone say it like that? 'Break up'. We didn't break anything; we're friends."

"But you're not, you know, together anymore." Will pointed out.

"Bullshit."

Will snorted in surprise. "Language! Don't let mum hear that."

She shrugged. "Dad says it often enough. I've got an excuse. But really; of course we are still together. We do everything as a group, right? I can tell him anything, and he me. That is together."

"But not like you were before."

"I'm not kissing him anymore. That's the only difference I can see."

"That's a big difference, though." Will argued. "Between love and friendship."

"Why?" The word burst out into the air like a gunshot. El's eyes were suddenly burning fire. The sudden change startled Will. "Why is it?" El demanded, stabbing a finger into his chest. "I love you, too. Why is that different?"

"Because it is..."

El didn't let him finish his thought. "Friend. Best friend. Boyfriend. Girlfriend." Each word was accompanied by a finger counting it off. "It's just words, and they are so – stupid! It doesn't matter what you call us: Mike wouldn't let you die in the Upside Down. You make me survive the nightmares. Lucas and Dustin fight all the time and always make up again. Max braids my hair." As proof, she showed him the little braids. "She makes fun of Lucas. And he of her. And that's love. And friendship. Being there for each other. So Mike wants to kiss you now. That's good. But anything else he'd do for you today, he'd have done yesterday, too. Because he loves you; friend or boyfriend. I didn't understand that when they found me, but now I do. All of you are family. Friends. Home. And if that's wrong or – *not normal*, then I don't want to be normal!"

There was a resounding silence after the last word spilled into the air.

Will was frozen, could only stare at her. He managed something as intelligent as "Oh."

El was breathing heavily after getting all of that out in one breath. Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Oh?"

"That- was a speech." Will managed, still dumbstruck. "You never make a speech."

"Well – it's annoying." El huffed. "Everyone makes such a big deal out of it."

"I guess." Will breathed. Then he surged forward and tackled his sister in a big Byers-hug. Probably a bit more enthusiastically than was healthy.

"Uff." El commented, out of breath again.

"Sorry." Will apologized. Though, if he looked at her slowly spreading grin, El didn't seem to mind too much. "You're right. Of course you're right." He pulled away to give her some space to breathe. "Doesn't matter what you call it. I'm an idiot."

"We established that already." El grinned.

"Shut up." Will elbowed her. He quietly on her version of 'friend' and 'boyfriend' and trying to fit Mike in there somewhere. Trying to place him within his feelings somehow.

He fit both.

The more Will thought about it, the more he had to admit that El had a point. Several points. Mike was his friend for pretty much his entire life, and what had he done with it? All he was thinking about was somehow making it more than that. As if his friendship wasn't enough.

It was, though. Will shook his head. He could ask; he *would* ask. Maybe Mike wanted it to be more, too. But if not – they'd deal with that, too. As friends, like they always did. As usual, El was opening up a completely new viewpoint for him, and suddenly years of anxiety about that difference were – well, not put to rest, but Will

sure felt stupid spending so much time worrying about it.

He elbowed her a second time. "Thank you."

Her eyes were laughing. "No problem."

"Is it okay if I call you El the Wise from now on?"

"The Wise? I don't think that suits me."

"It does."

"It does?"

"Yeah."

"Hm."

They drifted off into silence. There'd been enough food for thought in the past couple of minutes to chew on for a while, and talking right now didn't feel necessary. Will breathed out deeply and let his head rest back against the logs. Despite the howling noises of the wind just a couple of inches away, he felt almost peaceful. Next to him, El was doing the same.

Of course, this situation, them being crammed into this tiny space in the middle of the storm, couldn't reasonably last much longer, but for now it felt right.

"Did I really make the TV explode?" Will ventured after a while.

El nodded. She looked more impressed than scolding. "Yeah. You did."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. Mike's mom is pissed, though." El's peaceful expression turned sour, her eyes hardening. "She's..."

Suddenly, the entry hatch was thrown open, causing Will to nearly jump out of his skin. El, too, jolted upright as she saw the figure standing menacingly in the doorway; dark, bulky and without a

visible face. In response, sparks started twitching around El's fingers. All Will could think, for a second, was that the Upside Down had somehow sensed them talking about it and sent another creature to hunt them down.

Then the figure pointed a blue-tinged finger at them, and a familiar disgruntled voice came from where the face should be: "You! Unbelievable! C-couldn't you – brrrrrr; *cold!* – couldn't you have your hideout somewhere s-sensible and not-in-the-middle-of-the-freezing-bloody-woods?! Like, how about in your b-backyard like normal p-people?"

"Max?!" Will managed, scarcely trusting his eyes.

It had been tough enough for El and him to get through this weather, and he really hadn't expected any other company to show up. But now that she shuffled inside, it was, after all, very much his sharp-tongued friend crouching there, huddled in multiple layers of sweaters, with a knit cap and scarf over her head and face, and shaking like a leaf from the cold.

El and Will, noticing that fact at the same time, immediately rushed to wrap her up into their blanket, limbs twisting and bumping into each other in the enclosed space. Max was ice-cold. When they had finally sorted it out, El stared at the new arrival. "What are you doing here?" she asked half a second before Will could.

Max opened her mouth, closed it, then sneezed. She cursed and elbowed both of them, hard. "Getting you two idiots b-back, of course. You just left; then Holly left; then everyone was panicking; it's all a mess. You haven't *a-tschoo* – seen her, have you? "

7. Protect and Survive

Protect and Survive

The way forward looked identical to the one they came from. Or the one to the left; or the right. Everything just looked white.

They had gotten lost.

"Yes, I know we're lost, man!" Mike snapped at Dustin. "Tell me how we can get un-lost."

"How?! I can't see ten feet!" Dustin snapped back.

"Guys." Lucas shouted. They were all shouting to be heard over the wind. "Come on, stop it. We have to focus."

"That's what I'm trying!" Mike had to consciously stop himself from twisting his fingers in his nervousness. Or wrapping them around Dustin's throat.

Everyone's tempers were running a bit thin. There was nothing but white as far as Mike could see and slowly but surely panic was starting to creep in. He silently cursed the storm, himself, and most of all his stupid, stupid little sister. Why on earth had she just left without saying anything?

The four of them had rushed out into the storm as soon as they'd noticed Holly was gone, but by then it was too late. There was no sign of her. Or of Will, or El. Then Max had split up from them to check if Will was at Castle Byers, while the rest of them searched for Mike's little sister. So they were currently three party members and one baby sister down, lost in a snow storm and without a real plan.

And it was Mike's fault. If not for his stupid, spur of the moment madness, they would all be lying in his basement right now, and Holly would be fast asleep in the safety of her room. But no, he just had to go ahead and kiss his best friend, didn't he?

Which had started a chain reaction of events that had led them here,

though Mike still didn't fully comprehend how. Of all the reactions Mike had imagined – shock, disgust, gentle let-down – he hadn't expected Will to just run off. The look on his face – Mike hadn't seen that look since the Mind Flayer. Not just shock, but actual fear, bordering on panic. Mike had never wanted to see that look on his friend ever again, and never had he imagined that he would ever be the cause of it. So, yeah, to say that he had fucked up badly was an understatement.

He gritted his teeth and pushed harder against the snow.

Not long after, Dustin suddenly cried out and clutched his head, blood flowing from a gash on his cheek. It looked worse than it was and he didn't make a big deal out of it, but it was still nasty. The boys pulled up their hoods against the pelting of hailstones that now replaced the snowflakes ever so often. It slowed their progress even further. None of them seriously considered turning around, however.

The outlines of fences and street lights started to emerge in front of them in regular intervals. It looked familiar, and Mike mentally tried to map out what street this was. Jempsons, maybe.

Lucas had been staring at the ground almost the entire time since they left the Wheeler's house. Now he pointed at a couple of hollows in the snow ahead of them: "Hey, these kind of look like footprints. Maybe Holly came this way."

It was more of a hope than anything else, but Mike was willing to grasp for anything at this point. "Come on!"

But after only a couple of meters, the footprints – if that's what they were – were gone again. The snow was still piling up so quickly that even their own traces were starting to get lost behind them. They were chasing ghosts.

"She can't have gone far." Mike muttered, more to himself. "She can't have gone far."

Dustin groaned: "Dammit. We might as well be blind. Let's re-assess. Get in contact with Hop or something."

"The phone lines are all dead." They had tried that, extensively, but there was no reaching anybody.

Dustin threw up his hands: "Then let me make a break for the police station, so we can get more eyes out here. Cause this isn't working."

"By then it could be too la-..." Mike abruptly cut himself off when he realized what he was about to say. *Too late*. He squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to stop that train of thought right there. It led to places that he didn't want to revisit: months of talking into a silent walkie-talkie in the vain hopes that the girl he had only known for a week yet couldn't bear to believe was dead would pick up; staring into his best friend's eyes and willing him to come back while those eyes stared back at him without recognition; and then the endless minutes of uncertainty after they had burned the tunnels, when he didn't know if either of them had survived. Always this helpless feeling of *too late* and *you should have done more*. And now it was his baby sister who was lost, and all Mike had wished for most of the evening was that she would just go away and leave them alone. The cold, sinking feeling spreading through his chest had nothing to do with the storm.

It must have shown on his face. Dustin stepped a little closer so that he didn't have to shout and when he spoke again his tone was almost gentle: "Mike, we'll find them. But we can't do this alone. Look; I'll run to the police and get them to mount a search party. Hell, come to think of it, for all we know your sister's had the same idea and she's there right now. She's not stupid."

"That's actually a good point." Lucas jumped in in support.

Their path had led them to what looked like a crossroads. If Mike's mental map was correct, the right branch led into Mirkwood – and to the Byers' home. Where Holly might have gone, too. The police station was in the town centre, straight ahead.

Mike's every instinct protested against them splitting up even further, because *that's exactly what happened with the Mind Flayer*, but his friend was right, this wasn't working.

Dustin took Mike's silence as agreement. "Right. You two keep

searching, and I'll call in once I get there." It looked like he tried for an optimistic smile, though it was hard to tell through the snow: "We'll have this shit solved in no time."

"You sure you can find the way?" Lucas inquired.

Dustin snorted: "Please, you are talking to a Certified Boy Scout Advanced here. I could find my way blindfolded."

"Wasn't that only a ten-day programme?"

"Whatever. Point is, I'm going, you're searching. Put those awesome tracking skills to some use at last." With that, he set off into the white.

"Keep your walkie on, we'll radio if we find anything!" Lucas yelled after him. They could just make out Dustin raising his finger in thumbs up, then he was gone.

Mike watched him disappear, his mind whirring frantically to come up with some solution to all this. It was a good thing his friends knew what they were doing, because Mike knew he wasn't thinking straight. This entire thing crashing down on his head had completely blindsided him, and he had come dangerously close to just freezing up. He nervously fiddled with the buttons of their remaining walkie. Mike wished he had thought to give it to Max before she left. At least one of their three missing persons might have gone to Castle Byers, and he desperately needed to know that at least someone was safe.

What if they aren't? Even if they are, you've still ruined everything.

He made a conscious effort to pull himself together. No time for that now. He tried to block out everything that wasn't immediately helpful in the moment, to look at it with some distance. Like a textbook exercise: *All your friends are lost in a storm. The temperatures are freezing, there is almost no communication. How do we solve this problem?*

"Mike? You still there?"

Lucas had already gone a few steps ahead. There was worry in his every step, too, and Mike could plainly see that it was as much for his

girlfriend as for Will or Holly. As tough as him and Max tended to act around each other, they had been through the same things as the rest of the Party and so shared the same fears when someone went missing. But Lucas was currently doing a much better job of dealing with it than Mike was.

That set his priorities straight. They'd get everyone home safely. He had to make sure that happened. "Let's go," he told Lucas.

And then he'd deal with the fallout.

Castle Byers vanished behind the three teenagers as they pushed on into the storm, heading back to Hawkins. El forged ahead, while Will stayed as close to Max as possible. The redhead denied any suggestion that she wasn't fine, but with her blue fingers and lips she still looked dangerously close to hypothermia, and neither of them was about to risk losing sight of her and having her drop unconscious in the snow.

Visibility was still bad. In the white chaos, Will couldn't see further than the next ten feet in front of him. Clearly, he couldn't have been thinking straight when he stormed out into *this*.

And apparently Holly had followed him.

"How long ago was that?" Will asked Max again.

"I don't know, 30 minutes now? She must have gotten *somewhere* in that time." She sounded like she was saying that more to convince herself than anything else. "But if she didn't c-c-come here, then where did she go?"

Will slung an arm around her in an attempt to rub some warmth back into her. How long could a child hold out in this cold? Will shook his head, forcefully shoving away the image of Mike's little sister lying frozen somewhere in a snow drift. That wouldn't happen. Not if he had any say in it. It was his fault, and he was going to goddamn fix it.

All around them the storm was raging, but inside the little bubble El had created it was almost eerily quiet. It was all too easy to focus on

his nervous heartbeat and enter a spiral of thought which there was no coming back from. There wasn't anything to see, either; past the few feet of clear air there was nothing but white.

"Just to be clear, you three all owe me a mountain of chocolate after this." Max' voice sounded after a while. "If this isn't the ultimate test of friendship, I don't know what is."

"Friends don't want prices for their friendship." El threw over her shoulder. It came out strained, like she could barely spare enough focus to get the words out. With increasing worry, Will noted that her walk was becoming unsteady. In fact, she was almost tripping over her feet. She hadn't needed to use her powers like this in a long time, and the effort was showing.

They had to find Holly and get out of this, fast.

"Where could she have gone?" Will muttered, more to himself than the others. His friends didn't have an answer. The snow falling down on them had turned partly to hail and Will could almost physically feel the strain that it put on his sister.

Ten minutes later, Max finally conceded, "We need a new plan. It'd be dumb luck to run into her in this shit."

If only they knew where it was that Mike's little sister had wanted to go. As it was, they had absolutely nothing to go on. The thought occurred to Will that this must have been what his friends felt like when he had been lost in the Upside Down. Having no clue of what had actually happened, all they could do was guess.

Everything in Will's being resisted even considering the next thought, but he forced himself to consider it: *Maybe it'll take the same now as it did then.*

He caught up to El and placed a hand on her shoulder, stopping her. She turned towards him, blood pooling under her nose from the exertion. There was a tense look in her eyes, and Will knew she had thought the same thing.

They'd both blocked out the Upside Down as well as they could, but

now it didn't seem like they had a choice.

He squeezed her hand, simultaneously pleading and reassuring: "Can you?"

El nodded grimly. With an abrupt motion, she took off her scarf and tied it around her eyes like a blindfold. "I'll find her. You take over."

She made it sound like she wanted him to jump into the driver's seat of their family car; not hold back a fully grown snow storm. Like there wasn't even any question that he could do it. That somehow made it seem possible. Will nodded, even though she couldn't see.

El knelt down in the snow and went still. Will looked at her for a long moment, torn between his misgivings of leaving her alone with this, and the practical necessities of the situation. Then he took a deep breath and reached out. Conjured up what he wanted to happen in his head, willed the snow to stay clear of them, like El had done before. At first nothing happened, but then he felt resistance, something pushing back. He raised a hand into the air, like the Jedi had done in the movie they had been watching. The gesture wasn't actually doing anything, but it helped him concentrate. It helped, turning this into a game of play-acting; like it was Halloween and he was Luke Skywalker, channelling the Force.

Otherwise, reaching for that slimy, slithering thing inside him and directing its power outwards would have been too unnerving to continue. Otherwise, the cold that spread in his chest now might have paralyzed him. Every time he did this, it felt like the Shadow was back in his veins, its presence slowing down his heartbeat and numbing his limbs. Now, like it did every single cold winter, it seemed to grow more powerful. Will hated it, and he was never sure he was in complete control of it. How could he be, really? All he could do was concentrate on what he had to do and try to block out the rest. He took another deep breath and braced himself.

He felt the exact moment when El dropped her defences. There was a brief second of calm, and then the storm came crushing over them like a hammer and it was all he could do to stay on his feet. He grimaced and pushed back. In the middle of his struggle, he felt Max' grip tighten around his back and he was grateful to have that to focus

on.

Controlling this *thing* never came easy to him, and if he thought about it too much he knew he would lose what little control he had. Instead, Will thought of Mike.

They were in the basement and Mike was taking his hand. Holding it, not moving away. Reassuring. *I'm here. We'll get through this.*

The pressure faded into the background, the warmth of the memory battling the cold. Will wondered if Mike ever realized how much his simple gestures meant to him. Probably not.

He'd pushed those feelings down, buried them deep. Ignored the jealous pangs in his chest when the rest of the party talked about the pretty girls they'd seen at school. Pretended like he didn't care when everyone got dates and girlfriends, and he was still alone. Encouraged his best friend – and later the girl who was becoming like a sister to him – to commit to their relationship. It had kept him going, seeing them happy. And over time, it had gotten easier.

But now Mike had dragged those feelings right back out. Dug them up from their grave without a care for Will, who had just been about to put the grave stone on top and move on. He had kissed him. And now? Now there was hope, fluttering in Will's chest like a stupid, stubborn little butterfly, and he hated himself for how giddy it made him, still. He was 17 going on 18. Childhood crushes should not be having this effect anymore. They shouldn't.

Boys shouldn't love other boys in the first place.

Will stuttered as the memory that was his anchor changed. *It's not right, it never will be.* Imaginary Mike drew his hand back, a look of disgust spreading on his face. In that moment, Will knew he deserved it. Guilt and shame washed over him. He knew it was wrong to feel this way. He could never show or tell anyone.

What if they find out...

Unnatural...

Freak...

No son of mine...

His father, Troy, every voice of every other bully he'd known was joining the chorus. And with them came the cold, flooding his skin once more.

You don't belong here. Don't belong with them. Just give up, just let go...

And the Shadow, whispering, shouting in his head. Filling his chest with despair. Will shivered, feeling his hold slipping. He wanted to curl up and hide.

"You know, now I think about it, a mountain of chocolate isn't nearly enough recompense. I want each of you to try a round on my skateboard. Just for punishment. And my amusement."

Will blinked, the voices in his head fading suddenly against his friend's very real, brisk one. *Dustin and Mike struggling on top of a skateboard. The girls laughing from the side-lines.* There was a new image he could hold on to. Thank the heavens for Mad Max.

He dared to open his eyes to look at her. Max had cocked her head to the side, her look one of challenge. "Spare me the pitiful look. I won't let you get away this easily. Don't think you're exempt just because you're keeping me from freezing right now, Byers."

Will made a noise somewhere between a groan and a laugh. The pressure from the storm was still there, even though he had almost forgotten about it for a moment. "This's not as easy as it looks!" he managed.

"Bah, that little bit of snow?"

"It's rather *a lot* of snow, Max."

"Don't let me disturb you, then. Maximum Willpower, come on!"

Will blinked, very much caught off guard. But also a little bit amused. "Did you just make a double pun?" he questioned.

Max shrugged. "Might have." she proclaimed, her blue eyes flashing humorously. Credit to her; her distractions worked every time.

With his bubble somewhat under control, Will glanced over to El. His sister was motionless; her consciousness far away. Once, she had tried to explain to him what it felt like to enter this realm only she could access; the one they had dubbed the In-Between. Losing all feeling first; then everything increasing exponentially; only to find herself in a black, empty nothing. To Will, it almost sounded worse than the cold decay of the Upside-Down.

He wanted to reach out and touch her, show her that someone was there. But that would probably interrupt her concentration. Not to mention his own. He really couldn't spare any right now.

Will grew sombre. "How are you so sure that everything will turn out okay?" he asked Max. "That we're going to find Holly?"

"Correction: that you two are going to find her. I'm just the idiot following you along and pushing you forward." Max shrugged. "And second; yeah, I'm sure. I mean, this is just a snow storm. Some fucking bad weather. Come on. We've done too much to lose to that."

That was one way of looking at it, Will supposed. Easier for Max to say though; she wasn't the one having to hold back the 'bad weather'. He gritted his teeth as another wind hit his bubble.

"Kind of poetic, isn't it?"

Will glanced at her: "What?"

She made a vague gesture, encompassing Will's everything. "This."

"You just pointed to all of me."

"Yeah. I mean, look at this. You're the cleric, and you ended up getting the superpowers." She gave him a nudge. "Skinny little superhero."

Will huffed: "You make it sound cool. This doesn't feel like superhero."

Max pointedly glanced around. "I don't know. Looks pretty damn impressive to me."

Will followed her gaze and only now realized that he couldn't hear the storm anymore. His bubble was suddenly three times as big. When had that happened?

His surprise must have been extremely obvious. Max had a glint in her eye. "See? Self-confidence is the key to victory. Quit selling yourself short, Byers."

Will didn't know what he would have replied to that. He didn't get the chance, because in that moment El started moving again. She took off her blindfold, a shudder going through her entire body. Her upper lip was smeared red.

"Found her." she announced.

Mike squinted. He could see lights through the blizzard, coming from a few windows. He thought he recognized the house; they were almost at the edge of town and Castle Byers wasn't much further. Holly would have come this way.

More importantly; if the house had light then its phone line might still work, too. It was a small hope, but the house was far enough from theirs that it might not have been affected. Mike made his way towards it.

He started when Lucas appeared right next to him and the other started speaking directly into his ear in order to be heard: "You're thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yeah." he wished he sounded more sure. He glanced at his wrist watch. It showed 2:30am. Mike didn't know when they had started or how long they had been out here, but the barely visible footprints that Lucas had found in irregular intervals were the only trace of Holly they had seen, and they were running out of time. Mike didn't know how his baby sister could have possibly stayed ahead of them with their pace, but she had and by now she had to be freezing.

"Your sister is going to be fine; everything is going to be fine." Lucas tried to reassure him, like he had read his mind.

"I don't think so." Mike said bitterly. There was so much that absolutely wasn't fine at the moment, and Lucas barely knew the half of it. "First we have to find them, and then..." He didn't know what then. Will would probably yell at him, for a start. And he would have every right to. Friends didn't just kiss their friends out of the blue because they couldn't keep some stupid emotions in check. Especially not friends who had been through what they had been through. He had betrayed that trust. "Will will hate me."

"Dude, is that seriously what you're worried about right now? Hey! Stop beating yourself up about that, right now." Lucas' command came right when there was a short break in the wind, making it sound even harsher. When Mike glanced at him, his friend was looking at him firmly: "Okay, so you said something to Will that made him go crazy." It wasn't a question.

"I wasn't thinking..."

"Did you tell him that you like him? Like, *like* like him?"

Mike's head whipped around so fast he thought he could feel his neck snap. Cold panic was flooding his veins. "How...?"

"Just putting the pieces together." Lucas nodded to himself, took the numb Mike by the shoulder and dragged him under the porch of the lit house for some shelter. He rang the doorbell and turned to face his friend again. "Look, Will doesn't just up and leave, not unless he's *really* freaked out by something. There's not a lot left that can manage that."

"...but I could." Mike groaned, shoulders slumping. He hadn't done anything about his feelings for such a long time, and he'd managed to break that tradition at the worst possible time. And now he couldn't take it back, and Lucas had figured it out. Figured out Mike's liking of Will. Liking of *boys*.

Lucas glanced over his shoulder. "Whoever lives here is taking their sweet time to answer the door." he stated.

Mike barely heard him. Somehow, absurdly, the idea of everyone knowing suddenly scared him more than anything else this evening.

His mind instinctively raced through the possible things he could say to deny everything. Then his remaining sanity finally caught up and reminded him that Lucas was right; *that* was hardly the most pressing concern right now. It didn't really matter anymore; did it? "I kissed him." the words burst from his lips.

There, now it was out. Maybe Mike would have felt relieved if he weren't feeling so guilty. "Go on; tell me I'm a freak; an idiot; whatever. I know."

Lucas stared at him incredulously. Perhaps he hadn't expected such a direct confession. "You- so you didn't just... so you really *do* like him, then, and you never... and you pick now to..." With a groan, he buried his face in his hands. "Idiot. Why did you not say something sooner? Fuck, so that's why he ran off. Man, if you have to kiss him at least warn him first, for fuck's sake!"

Mike let his head fall, then stopped half-way through the motion when he noticed the undertone in-between Lucas' cursing. "Wait. Are you saying I should have – are you okay with it?"

His friend's face twisted in a way Mike had never seen before. "I don't know, man, it's- it feels a bit weird. You and Will, like... I don't know." He shook his head forcefully. "But seriously; if that's how it is, you couldn't have picked any better time?! Like literally any other?"

Mike sighed. "It doesn't matter now, anyway. You saw what happened. We don't have time for this now; we have to find Will and El and my sister, and maybe afterwards I can ask him to forgive me. I'll settle for friends if he will; it's probably just a stupid crush, anyway."

Lucas stared at him like he wasn't sure what he was looking at. Finally, he shook his head: "Jesus. You are so blind, man."

Mike frowned. "What the hell does that mean, now?"

"Seriously, our cleric wears his heart on his sleeve, and the way he used to look at you..." Lucas broke off. "Fucking hell. You'll figure that out once we're out of this mess. By now Dustin should have found Hopper, and if Holly's come this way..."

He never got to finish his sentence. The door they were huddled against swung open, making the two of them almost fall headfirst into the house. Mike caught himself just in time.

The elderly woman who had opened it didn't look nearly as surprised as she should have been to find two teenage boys on her doorstep. "What are you doing outside? Come in!" she exclaimed immediately.

She looked old enough to be Mike's grandma, with a stocky frame and a cane in her left hand which she leaned on heavily. No wonder it had taken her so long to open the door. More importantly, though, Mike could see a phone receiver on the wall behind her. Now just to hope that it worked.

"Uh, sorry." Lucas apologized, taking the lead for the still slightly shaken Mike. "Could we use your phone, please? We just really need to call someone and then we're already gone again."

"Not in this storm you're not." the old woman protested, ushering them inside with her free hand. "The phone works, alright. But what is wrong with you children these days, to be outside in this weather? You could get frostbite!"

"It's really urgent." Lucas explained. "We have to call the police."

But Mike had stopped mid-step as the woman's words had reached him. "What do you mean, 'children'? Have you seen many children in this storm?"

"Right well I have! Everyone must think it's such a good idea to play outside, and never mind the fever or the toes falling off! I used to work at the hospital, you know, and I've seen more than my fair share of stupid folk like that. Older folk than you, too, but mostly it's boys your age. Irresponsible. You two need some hot tea and mittens before I'll let you back out that door, and then your parents will get something to hear..."

Mike's thoughts were racing. He cursed himself for not thinking of this before. Holly and he were wired very similarly, fervently though he might deny that. Despite her being only six and just coming up to his knees, her first thought must have been to call the police, too. If

she had come this way and seen this lit house...

"Excuse me," he cut through the woman's stream of words, "have you seen a girl? Small, six years old, wearing a rainbow jacket? She's my sister and we are looking for her."

The woman looked at him in surprise. "She is your sister?"

His heart skipped a couple of beats. "Is she still here?!" he asked breathlessly.

"The poor thing was half-frozen." the woman shook her head. "Told me to call the cops, too, but I told her 'No; first I'll make you a hot cup of tea!' What was she thinking, being outside in this weather..."

"Where is she?!" Mike interrupted. "You didn't let her leave, did you?!"

"What- of course not! She's right back there in the kitchen, with some hot tea. Right worked up she was; took me some time to get her to sit down. Young man, how could you let such a little girl..."

Mike had already stormed past her. In addition to relief, there was now anger building inside him. Holly would get something to hear from him, and he didn't even care that their mother would no doubt give her a far worse speech than he could ever come up with...

That though process came to an abrupt stop, just as Mike did when he stormed into the kitchen. The room was empty, save for a steaming mug on the table. No Holly anywhere.

Lucas barged into him from behind, startled at Mike's sudden stop. His eyes, too, fixed on the steaming mug. "Where is...?"

"Holly!" Mike yelled, in the hope that she would just be over in the next room. But no little sister came running around the corner. Then he saw the window. The pane was thrown open, with a cold wind blowing in from outside.

Mike cursed silently. Damn his stubborn, stupid sister. "She's gone!" he told the old woman who came shuffling in behind them.

She stared at the open window. "But she couldn't have... I only just left to open the door..."

"She can't have gone long! Come on!"

"We should still find her footprints." Lucas added.

They left back through the front door and hurried around the side of the house. Snow drifts had piled up almost to their knees and they had to move agonizingly slow. Maybe Mike was imagining it, but visibility seemed to be improving. The storm seemed to be letting up.

Still there was no sign of his sister. When they turned the corner, he couldn't see any footprints on the ground. But the fence to the neighbouring garden had been blown over, making that the only possible way to go, and Mike started in that direction. Scratch his mother's speech; Holly would certainly get something to hear from him first.

He was already half-way over the fallen fence posts when Lucas suddenly called, "Mike?!"

Mike stopped and turned around, following his friend's line of sight. At first he didn't see what he was pointing at. There was just a pile of snow right below the roof, only sticking up a little higher than that around it. Then Mike saw the little speck of colour in the white that Lucas had noticed.

Just a piece of it stuck out of the heap. Rainbow-coloured. And, barely visible, five blue little fingers attached to it.

His brain short-circuited. He rushed towards the heap, grabbed for the hand and pulled. The little body of his sister emerged from the snow, covered head to toe in the same rainbow colours. The edge of some rusted piece of metal emerged with her. Holly's face was blue, just like her fingers. Her eyes were closed.

Please no. Please don't let this happen. Mike put his ear to his sister's chest, frantically searching for a heartbeat, but through the layers of clothing he couldn't hear anything. "Get help!" he cried over his shoulder at Lucas. He heard his friend rushing off.

Holly was ice-cold. *Like Will, once the Mind Flayer had him.* Mike remembered that clammy feeling of his skin vividly, though he fervently wished he didn't. He hugged the small body in his arms in an attempt to spend as much warmth as he could.

"Ugh."

It was little more than a breath that escaped from Holly's lips, but it was a life sign. Mike nearly sobbed with relief. He hugged her tighter, cradling her head against his chest. If he could just get her inside quickly, that terrible blue colour would vanish from her face...

That's when he noticed the blood.

It had already hardened in the cold, but Holly had a big gash on her forehead, right at the hairline. Mike ghosted his hand over it with concern. It almost looked as if she had been hit over the head. His eyes fell on the pile of snow, then on the rusty piece of metal that had been buried alongside Holly. It was long, with small bars set in regular intervals. Mike could see a jagged edge where the metal seemed to have been violently ripped apart.

By the time he made the connection and noticed the creaking noise overhead, it was too late.

He looked up just as the second roof-gutter they were crouched underneath gave way under the pressure of snow that had piled up; the metal screaming as it tore free from its embedding and fell, directly towards them. An avalanche of snow came with it.

The world seemed to shrink. In the split second he had, Mike did the only sensible thing: he lifted his arms to protect his head and used the rest of his body to shield Holly as best as he could. He closed his eyes, waiting for the impact.

The world became very quiet all of a sudden.

After a good five seconds, Mike realized that nothing had happened. *What?* He lowered his hands and looked up – and then he saw his friend standing there, just a couple of feet away. Mike blinked at him, uncomprehending. He had to be hallucinating. "Will?" he said

uncertainly.

The Will-hallucination looked at him; his face twisted in concentration and his eyes flicking back and forth between Mike and something above his head.

Mike glanced up.

Above them, the entire mass of ice, snow and roof gutter was floating in mid-air, only inches separating it from his head. Mike's mouth fell open. He turned back around to his friend. Will gritted his teeth, and the absurd cloud that had nearly buried Mike and Holly moved. Agonizingly slowly so, but it did move, until the air above them was clear. Then Will gasped and his knees crumpled. With a muted *ploof*, the avalanche crashed down a few feet behind the Wheelers. A split second later, Will followed.

"Will!" every fibre of Mike's body wanted to rush over to him, but he didn't dare let go of Holly, either.

Lucas solved his dilemma, turning up with some man by his side who must have been a neighbour or something; it didn't really matter. His friend forcefully pried Holly from Mike's hands and they carried her off. By the time Mike had bolted over to where Will had fallen, Max and El were already there, having turned up from somewhere and pulling him up from the snow.

"Got him." El said, sounding relieved. "Got each other."

"Jesus Christ, did you see that?!" added Max, sounding breathless.

All three of them looked dead-tired. Will just looked awful. His face was smeared with dirt and tear lines, dark circles appearing under his eyes. His nose was bleeding and he looked worryingly pale. But he was breathing and his eyes were open, and in that moment that was all that mattered to Mike. The dread that had sat with him since his friend had stormed out of the house fell somewhere by his feet, giving way to a feeling that was almost relief, if the situation weren't so serious. He moved in and slipped one of his friend's arms over his shoulder, taking over from Max, who looked like she could barely stay upright herself. Neither could El, now that Mike looked at her.

She caught his gaze and gave a slight nod. "It's okay. Found you. Found her. All safe." she said. Tiredness and urgency still sometimes brought forth that concise way of speaking that she had all but shed in the years after the lab.

But her words calmed Mike down a tiny bit. She tended to have that effect. That and the fact that Will was okay, at least more than before. "How- *how*? How did you find us? Were you together? Max, did you..."

Will gave an incoherent noise.

Mike twisted to get a good look at his face, worry and anxiousness coming right back. He still had trouble processing what he had seen his small best friend just do. On the upside, that combined with the single-minded focus of *get them to safety now* effectively stopped him from thinking about anything else. "Will?"

"M' fine." came the muffled answer. The hazel eyes blinked up at him, unfocused but with recognition. "You're – okay." he muttered.

"Ssh, don't talk." Mike admonished. With a quick glance at the two girls, he made sure that they were still holding up. "Come on. Inside. Lucas's got Holly there already. You need to warm up."

The four of them had to make an odd sight, carrying each other more than walking across the doorstep. Mike didn't really care; they were here. From then on, the rest of what happened was all a blur for him. There were faces, familiar and unfamiliar; hugs; hot tea; police lights and questions and then at some point he just sat down somewhere and passed out.

Well, the new season came and went real fast, didn't it? And with it came the ideas to write more stuff. But this time, before I start anything new, I'm finally finishing up the stories that I left hanging for one reason or another. This one in particular I've been dying to complete.